

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

(HANSARD)

SIXTH SERIES—VOLUME 294

HOUSE OF COMMONS

OFFICIAL REPORT

FIRST SESSION OF THE FIFTY-SECOND PARLIAMENT
OF THE UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN
AND NORTHERN IRELAND
FORTY-SIXTH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II

SESSION 1997-98

COMPRISING PERIOD

7 May—22 May 1997

Chronology of "The Parliamentary Debates"

The Parliamentary History contains all that can be collected of the Legislative History of this country from the Conquest to the close of the XVIIIth Century (1803), 36 vols. The chief sources whence these Debates are derived are the Constitutional History, 24 vols.; Sir Simonds D'Ewes' Journal; Debates of the Commons in 1620 and 1621; Chandler and Timberland's Debates, 22 vols.; Grey's Debates of the Commons, from 1667 to 1694, 10 vols.; Almons Debates, 24 vols.; Debrett's Debates, 63 vols.; The Hardwicke Papers; Debates in Parliament by Dr. Johnson, &c. &c.

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House of Commons

Alphabetical List of Members

[Returned at the General Election, 1 May 1997]

A

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Ainger, Nicholas Richard (Carmarthen, West and South Pembrokeshire)
Ainsworth, Peter Michael (East Surrey)
Ainsworth, Robert William (Coventry, North East)
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Anderson, Mrs. Janet (Rossendale and Darwen)
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Armstrong, Hilary Jane (North West Durham)
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Ashton, Joseph William (Bassetlaw)
Atherton, Candice Kathieen (Falmouth and Camborne)
Atkins, Charlotte (Staffordshire, Moorlands)
Atkinson, David Anthony (Bournemouth, East)
Atkinson, Peter Landreth (Hexham)
Austin-Walker, John Eric (Erith and Thamesmead)

B

Baker, Norman John (Lewes)
Baldry, Anthony Brian (Banbury)
Ballard, Mrs. Jacqueline Margaret (Taunton)
Banks, Anthony Louis (West Ham)
Barnes, Harold (North East Derbyshire)
Barron, Kevin John (Rother Valley)
Battle, John Dominic (Leeds, West)
Bayley, Hugh (City of York)
Beard, Christopher Nigel (Bexleyheath and Crayford)
Beckett, Rt. Hon. Margaret Mary (Derby, South)
Begg, Anne (Aberdeen, South)
Beggs, Roy (East Antrim)
Beith, Rt. Hon. Alan James (Berwick-upon-Tweed)
Bell, Martin (Tatton)
Bell, Stuart (Middlesbrough)
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Benton, Joseph Edward (Bootle)
Bercow, John Simon (Buckingham)
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Blair, Rt. Hon. Anthony Charles Lynton (Sedgefield)
Blears, Hazel Anne (Salford)

Blizzard, Robert John (Waveney)
Blunkett, David (Sheffield, Brightside)
Blunt, Crispin Jeremy Rupert (Reigate)
Boateng, Paul Yaw (Brent, South)
Body, Sir Richard Bernard Frank Stewart (Boston and Skegness)
Boothroyd, Rt. Hon. Betty (West Bromwich, West)
Borrow, David Stanley (South Ribble)
Boswell, Timothy Eric (Daventry)
Bottomley, Peter James (Worthing, West)
Bottomley, Rt. Hon. Mrs. Virginia Hilda Brunette Maxwell (South West Surrey)
Bradley, Keith John Charles (Manchester, Withington)
Bradley, Peter Charles Stephen (The Wrekin)
Bradshaw, Benjamin Peter James (Exeter)
Brady, Graham (Altrincham and Sale, West)
Brake, Thomas Anthony (Carshalton and Wallington)
Brand, Dr. Peter (Isle of Wight)
Brazier, Julian William Hendy TD (Canterbury)
Breed, Colin Edward (South East Cornwall)
Brinton, Helen Rosemary (Peterborough)
Brooke, Rt. Hon. Peter Leonard CH (Cities of London and Westminster)
Brown, Rt. Hon. James Gordon (Dunfermline, East)
Brown, Nicholas Hugh (Newcastle upon Tyne, East and Wallsend)
Brown, Russell Leslie (Dumfries)
Browne, Desmond (Kilmarnock and Loudoun)
Browning, Mrs. Angela Frances (Tiverton and Honiton)
Bruce, Ian Cameron (South Dorset)
Bruce, Malcolm Gray (Gordon)
Buck, Karen Patricia (Regent's Park and Kensington, North)
Burden, Richard Haines (Birmingham, Northfield)
Burgon, Colin (Elmet)
Burnett, John Patrick Aubone (Torridge and West Devon)
Burns, Simon Hugh McGuigan (West Chelmsford)
Burstow, Paul Kenneth (Sutton and Cheam)
Butler, Christine Margaret (Castle Point)
Butterfill, John Valentine (Bournemouth, West)
Byers, Stephen John (North Tyneside)

C

Cable, Dr. John Vincent (Twickenham)
Caborn, Richard George (Sheffield, Central)
Campbell, Alan (Tynemouth)
Campbell, Anne (Cambridge)
Campbell, Ronald (Blyth Valley)
Campbell, Menzies CBE, QC (North East Fife)
Campbell-Savours, Dale Norman (Workington)
Canavan, Dennis Andrew (Falkirk, West)
Cann, James Charles (Ipswich)
Caplin, Ivor Keith (Hove)
Casale, Roger Mark (Wimbledon)
Cash, William Nigel Paul (Stone)

Caton, Martin Philip (Gower)
 Cawsey, Ian Arthur (Brigg and Goole)
 Chapman, James Keith (Wirral, South)
 Chapman, Sir Sydney Brookes (Chipping Barnet)
 Chaytor, David Michael (Bury, North)
 Chidgey, David William George (Eastleigh)
 Chisholm, Malcolm George Richardson (Edinburgh, North and Leith)
 Chope, Christopher Robert (Christchurch)
 Church, Judith Ann (Dagenham)
 Clapham, Michael (Barnsley, West and Penistone)
 Clappison, William James (Hertsmere)
 Clark, Rt. Hon. Alan Kenneth McKenzie (Kensington and Chelsea)
 Clark, David George (South Shields)
 Clark, Lynda Margaret QC (Edinburgh, Pentlands)
 Clark, Dr. Michael (Rayleigh)
 Clark, Paul Gordon (Gillingham)
 Clarke, Anthony Richard (Northampton, South)
 Clarke, Charles Rodway (Norwich, South)
 Clarke, Eric Lionel (Midlothian)
 Clarke, Rt. Hon. Kenneth Harry QC (Rushcliffe)
 Clarke, Thomas CBE (Coatbridge and Chryston)
 Clelland, David Gordon (Tyne Bridge)
 Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey Robert (Cotswold)
 Clwyd, Ann (Cynon Valley)
 Coaker, Vernon Rodney (Gedling)
 Coffey, Ann (Stockport)
 Cohen, Harry Michael (Leyton and Wanstead)
 Coleman, Iain (Hammersmith and Fulham)
 Collins, Timothy William George (Westmorland and Lonsdale)
 Colman, Anthony (Putney)
 Colvin, Michael Keith Beale (Romsey)
 Connarty, Michael (Falkirk, East)
 Cook, Francis (Stockton, North)
 Cook, Rt. Hon. Robert Finlayson (Livingston)
 Cooper, Yvette (Pontefract and Castleford)
 Corbett, Robin (Birmingham, Erdington)
 Corbyn, Jeremy Bernard (Islington, North)
 Cormack, Sir Patrick Thomas (South Staffordshire)
 Corston, Jean Ann (Bristol, East)
 Cotter, Brian Joseph (Weston-super-Mare)
 Cousins, James Mackay (Newcastle upon Tyne, Central)
 Cox, Thomas Michael (Tooting)
 Cran, James Douglas (Beverley and Holderness)
 Cranston, Ross Frederick (Dudley, North)
 Crausby, David Anthony (Bolton, North East)
 Cryer, Mrs. Constance Ann (Keighley)
 Cryer, John Robert (Hornchurch)
 Cummings, John Scott (Easington)
 Cunliffe, Lawrence Francis (Leigh)
 Cunningham, James Dolan (Coventry, South)
 Cunningham, Rt. Hon. John Anderson (Copeland)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth)
 Curry, Rt. Hon. David Maurice (Skipton and Ripon)
 Curtis-Tansley, Claire (Crosby)

D

Dafis, Cynog Glyndwr (Ceredigion)
 Dalryell, Tam (Linlithgow)
 Darling, Alistair Maclean (Edinburgh, Central)

Darvill, Keith Ernest (Upminster)
 Davey, Edward Jonathon (Kingston and Surbiton)
 Davey, Valerie (Bristol, West)
 Davidson, Ian Graham (Glasgow, Pollok)
 Davies, Rt. Hon. David John Denzil (Llanelli)
 Davies, Geraint Richard (Croydon, Central)
 Davies, John Quentin (Grantham and Stamford)
 Davies, Ronald (Caerphilly)
 Davis, Rt. Hon. David Michael (Haltemprice and Howden)
 Davis, Terence Anthony Gordon (Birmingham, Hodge Hill)
 Dawson, Thomas Hilton (Lancaster and Wyre)
 Day, Stephen Richard (Cheadle)
 Dean, Janet Elizabeth Ann (Burton)
 Denham, John Yorke (Southampton, Itchen)
 Dewar, Rt. Hon. Donald Campbell (Glasgow, Anniesland)
 Dismore, Andrew Hartley (Hendon)
 Dobbin, James (Heywood and Middleton)
 Dobson, Frank Gordon (Holborn and St. Pancras)
 Donaldson, Jeffrey Mark (Lagan Valley)
 Donohoe, Brian Harold (Cunninghame, South)
 Doran, Frank (Aberdeen, Central)
 Dorrell, Rt. Hon. Stephen James (Charnwood)
 Dowd, James Patrick (Lewisham, West)
 Drew, David Elliott (Stroud)
 Drown, Julia Kate (South Swindon)
 Duncan, Alan James Carter (Rutland and Melton)
 Duncan Smith, George Iain (Chingford and Woodford Green)
 Dunwoody, Mrs. Gwyneth Patricia (Crewe and Nantwich)

E

Eagle, Angela (Wallasey)
 Eagle, Maria (Liverpool, Garston)
 Edwards, Huw William Edmund (Monmouth)
 Efford, Clive Stanley (Eltham)
 Ellman, Louise Joyce (Liverpool, Riverside)
 Emery, Rt. Hon. Sir Peter Frank Hannibal (East Devon)
 Ennis, Jeffrey (Barnsley, East and Mexborough)
 Etherington, William (Sunderland, North)
 Evans, Nigel Martin (Ribble Valley)
 Ewing, Mrs. Margaret Anne (Moray)

F

Faber, David James Christian (Westbury)
 Fabricant, Michael Louis David (Lichfield)
 Fallon, Michael Cathel (Sevenoaks)
 Fatchett, Derek John (Leeds, Central)
 Fearn, Ronald Cyril (Southport)
 Field, Frank (Birkenhead)
 Fisher, Mark (Stoke-on-Trent, Central)
 Fitzpatrick, James (Poplar and Canning Town)
 Fitzsimons, Lorna (Rochdale)
 Flight, Howard Emerson (Arundel and South Downs)
 Flint, Caroline Louise (Don Valley)
 Flynn, Paul Phillip (Newport, West)
 Follett, Daphne Barbara (Stevenage)
 Forsythe, Clifford (South Antrim)
 Forth, Rt. Hon. Eric (Bromley and Chislehurst)
 Foster, Rt. Hon. Derek (Bishop Auckland)

Foster, Donald Michael Ellison (Bath)
 Foster, Michael Jabez (Hastings and Rye)
 Foster, Michael John (Worcester)
 Foulkes, George (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley)
 Fowler, Rt. Hon. Sir Peter Norman (Sutton Coldfield)
 Fox, Dr. Liam (Woodspring)
 Fraser, Christopher James (Mid Dorset and North Poole)
 Fyfe, Mrs. Maria (Glasgow, Maryhill)

G

Galbraith, Samuel Laird (Strathkelvin and Bearsden)
 Gale, Roger James (North Thanet)
 Galloway, George (Glasgow, Kelvin)
 Gapes, Michael John (Ilford, South)
 Gardiner, Barry Strachan (Brent, North)
 Garnier, Edward Henry (Harborough)
 George, Andrew Henry (St. Ives)
 George, Bruce Thomas (Walsall, South)
 Gerrard, Neil Francis (Walthamstow)
 Gibb, Nicolas John (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton)
 Gibson, Dr. Ian (Norwich, North)
 Gill, Christopher John Fred RD (Ludlow)
 Gillan, Mrs. Cheryl Elise Kendall (Chesham and Amersham)
 Gilroy, Mrs. Linda (Plymouth, Sutton)
 Godman, Dr. Norman Anthony (Greenock and Inverclyde)
 Godsiff, Roger Duncan (Birmingham, Sparkbrook and Small Heath)
 Goggins, Paul Gerard (Wythenshawe and Sale, East)
 Golding, Mrs. Llinos (Newcastle-under-Lyme)
 Goodlad, Rt. Hon. Alastair Robertson (Eddisbury)
 Gordon, Mrs. Eileen (Romford)
 Gorman, Mrs. Teresa Ellen (Billericay)
 Gorrie, Donald Cameron Easterbrook (Edinburgh, West)
 Graham, Thomas (West Renfrewshire)
 Grant, Bernard Alexander Montgomery (Tottenham)
 Gray, James Whiteside (North Wiltshire)
 Green, Damian Howard (Ashford)
 Greenway, John Robert (Ryedale)
 Grieve, Dominic Charles Roberts (Beaconsfield)
 Griffiths, Jane Patricia (Reading, East)
 Griffiths, Nigel (Edinburgh, South)
 Griffiths, Winston James (Bridgend)
 Grocott, Bruce Joseph (Telford)
 Grogan, John Timothy (Selby)
 Gummer, Rt. Hon. John Selwyn (Suffolk, Coastal)
 Gunnell, William John (Morley and Rothwell)

H

Hague, Rt. Hon. William Jefferson (Richmond, Yorks)
 Hain, Peter Gerald (Neath)
 Hall, Michael Thomas (Weaver Vale)
 Hall, Patrick (Bedford)
 Hamilton, Rt. Hon. Sir Archibald Gavin (Epsom and Ewell)
 Hamilton, Fabian (Leeds, North East)
 Hammond, Philip (Runnymede and Weybridge)
 Hancock, Michael Thomas (Portsmouth, South)

Hanson, David George (Delyn)
 Harman, Harriet Ruth (Camberwell and Peckham)
 Harris, Dr. Evan (Oxford, West and Abingdon)
 Harvey, Nicholas Barton (North Devon)
 Haselhurst, Sir Alan Gordon Barraclough (Saffron Walden)
 Hawkins, Nicholas John (Surrey Heath)
 Hayes, John Henry (South Holland and The Deepings)
 Heal, Mrs. Sylvia Lloyd (Halesowen and Rowley Regis)
 Heald, Oliver (North East Hertfordshire)
 Healey, John (Wentworth)
 Heath, David William St. John (Somerton and Frome)
 Heath, Rt. Hon. Sir Edward Richard George KG, MBE (Old Bexley and Sidcup)
 Heathcoat-Amory, Rt. Hon. David Philip (Wells)
 Henderson, Douglas John (Newcastle upon Tyne, North)
 Henderson, Ivan John (Harwich)
 Hepburn, Stephen (Jarrow)
 Heppell, John (Nottingham, East)
 Heseltine, Rt. Hon. Michael Ray Dibden (Henley)
 Hesford, Stephen (Wirral, West)
 Hewitt, Patricia Hope (Leicester, West)
 Hill, Trevor Keith (Streatham)
 Hinchliffe, David Martin (Wakefield)
 Hodge, Mrs. Margaret Eve MBE (Barking)
 Hoey, Catharine Letitia (Vauxhall)
 Hogg, Rt. Hon. Douglas Martin QC (Sleaford and North Hykeham)
 Home Robertson, John David (East Lothian)
 Hood, James (Clydesdale)
 Hoon, Geoffrey William (Ashfield)
 Hope, Philip Ian (Corby)
 Hopkins, Kelvin Peter (Luton, North)
 Horam, John Rhodes (Orpington)
 Howard, Rt. Hon. Michael QC (Folkestone and Hythe)
 Howarth, Alan Thomas CBE (Newport, East)
 Howarth, George Edward (Knowsley, North and Sefton, East)
 Howarth, James Gerald Douglas (Aldershot)
 Howells, Dr. Kim Scott (Pontypridd)
 Hoyle, Lindsay Harvey (Chorley)
 Hughes, Beverley June (Stretford and Urmston)
 Hughes, Kevin Michael (Doncaster, North)
 Hughes, Simon Henry Ward (North Southwark and Bermondsey)
 Humble, Mrs. Jovanka (Blackpool, North and Fleetwood)
 Hume, John (Foyle)
 Hunter, Andrew Robert Frederick (Basingstoke)
 Hurst, Alan Arthur (Braintree)
 Hutton, John Matthew Patrick (Barrow and Furness)

I

Iddon, Brian (Bolton, South-East)
 Illsley, Eric Evelyn (Barnsley, Central)
 Ingram, Adam Paterson (East Kilbride)

J

Jack, Rt. Hon. John Michael (Fylde)
 Jackson, Glenda May CBE (Hampstead and Highgate)
 Jackson, Mrs. Helen Margaret (Sheffield, Hillsborough)
 Jackson, Robert Victor (Wantage)

Jamieson, David Charles (Plymouth, Devonport)
 Jenkin, Bernard Christison (North Essex)
 Jenkins, Brian David (Tamworth)
 Johnson, Alan Arthur (Kingston upon Hull, West and Hessele)
 Johnson, Melanie Jane (Welwyn Hatfield)
 Johnson Smith, Rt. Hon. Sir Geoffrey (Wealden)
 Jones, Fiona Elizabeth Ann (Newark)
 Jones, Helen Mary (Warrington, North)
 Jones, Ieuan Wyn (Ynys Môn)
 Jones, Jennifer Grace (Wolverhampton, South West)
 Jones, Jon Owen (Cardiff, Central)
 Jones, Dr. Lynne Mary (Birmingham, Selly Oak)
 Jones, Martyn David (Clwyd, South)
 Jones, Nigel David (Cheltenham)
 Jones, Stephen Barry (Alyn and Deeside)
 Jowell, Tessa Jane Helen Douglas (Dulwich and West Norwood)

K

Kaufman, Rt. Hon. Gerald Bernard (Manchester, Gorton)
 Keeble, Sally Curtis (Northampton, North)
 Keen, Mrs. Ann Lloyd (Brentford and Isleworth)
 Keen, Alan (Feltham and Heston)
 Keetch, Paul Stuart (Hereford)
 Kelly, Mrs. Ruth Maria (Bolton, West)
 Kemp, Fraser (Houghton and Washington, East)
 Kennedy, Charles Peter (Ross, Skye and Inverness, West)
 Kennedy, Mrs. Jane Elizabeth (Liverpool, Wavertree)
 Key, Simon Robert (Salisbury)
 Khabra, Piara Singh (Ealing, Southall)
 Kidney, David Neil (Stafford)
 Kilfoyle, Peter (Liverpool, Walton)
 King, Andrew (Rugby and Kenilworth)
 King, Oona Tamsyn (Bethnal Green and Bow)
 King, Rt. Hon. Thomas Jeremy CH (Bridgwater)
 Kingham, Teresa Jane (Gloucester)
 Kirkbride, Julie (Bromsgrove)
 Kirkwood, Archibald Johnstone (Roxburgh and Berwickshire)
 Kumar, Ashok (Middlesbrough, South and East Cleveland)

L

Ladyman, Stephen John (South Thanet)
 Laing, Mrs. Eleanor Fulton (Epping Forest)
 Lansley, Andrew David (South Cambridgeshire)
 Lawrence, Mrs. Jacqueline Rita (Preseli Pembrokeshire)
 Laxton, Robert (Derby, North)
 Leigh, Edward Julian Egerton (Gainsborough)
 Lepper, David (Brighton, Pavilion)
 Leslie, Christopher Michael (Shipley)
 Letwin, Oliver (West Dorset)
 Levitt, Tom (High Peak)
 Lewis, Ivan (Bury, South)
 Lewis, Julian Murray (New Forest, East)
 Lewis, Terence (Worsley)
 Liddell, Mrs. Helen Lawrie (Airdrie and Shotts)
 Lidington, David Roy (Aylesbury)
 Lilley, Rt. Hon. Peter Bruce (Hitchin and Harpenden)
 Linton, John Martin (Battersea)

Livingstone, Kenneth Robert (Brent, East)
 Livsey, Richard Arthur Lloyd (Brecon and Radnorshire)
 Lloyd, Anthony Joseph (Manchester, Central)
 Lloyd, Rt. Hon. Sir Peter Robert Cable (Fareham)
 Llwyd, Elfyn (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy)
 Lock, David Anthony (Wyre Forest)
 Lord, Michael Nicholson (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich)
 Loughton, Timothy Paul (East Worthing and Shoreham)
 Love, Andrew (Edmonton)
 Luff, Peter James (Mid Worcestershire)
 Lyell, Rt. Hon. Sir Nicholas Walter QC (North East Bedfordshire)

M

McAlin, John (Dundee, East)
 McAvoy, Thomas McLaughlin (Glasgow, Rutherglen)
 McCabe, Stephen James (Birmingham, Hall Green)
 McCafferty, Christine (Calder Valley)
 McCartney, Ian (Makerfield)
 McCartney, Robert Law QC (North Down)
 McDonagh, Siobhain Ann (Mitcham and Morden)
 Macdonald, Calum Alasdair (Western Isles)
 McDonnell, John Martin (Hayes and Harlington)
 McFall, John (Dumbarton)
 McGrady, Edward Kevin (South Down)
 MacGregor, Rt. Hon. John Roddick Russell OBE (South Norfolk)
 McGuinness, Martin (Mid Ulster)
 McGuire, Mrs. Anne (Stirling)
 McIntosh, Anne Caroline Ballingall (Vale of York)
 McIsaac, Shona (Cleethorpes)
 MacKay, Andrew James (Bracknell)
 McKenna, Rosemary (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth)
 Mackinlay, Andrew Stuart (Thurrock)
 Maclean, Rt. Hon. David John (Penrith and The Border)
 McLeish, Henry Baird (Central Fife)
 MacLennan, Robert Adam Ross (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross)
 McLoughlin, Patrick Allen (West Derbyshire)
 McMaster, Gordon (Paisley, South)
 McNamara, Joseph Kevin (Kingston upon Hull, North)
 McNulty, Anthony James (Harrow, East)
 MacShane, Denis (Rotherham)
 Mactaggart, Fiona Margaret (Slough)
 McWalter, Tony (Hemel Hempstead)
 McWilliam, John David (Blaydon)
 Madel, Sir William David (South West Bedfordshire)
 Maginnis, Kenneth (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
 Mahon, Mrs. Alice (Halifax)
 Major, Rt. Hon. John (Huntingdon)
 Malins, Humfrey Jonathon (Woking)
 Mallaber, Clare Judith (Amber Valley)
 Mallon, Seamus (Newry and Armagh)
 Mandelson, Peter Benjamin (Hartlepool)
 Maples, John Cradock (Stratford-on-Avon)
 Marek, Dr. John (Wrexham)
 Marsden, Gordon (Blackpool, South)
 Marsden, Paul William Barry (Shrewsbury and Atcham)
 Marshall, David (Glasgow, Shettleston)

Marshall, James (Leicester, South)
 Marshall-Andrews, Robert Graham (Medway)
 Martin, Michael John (Glasgow, Springburn)
 Martlew, Eric Anthony (Carlisle)
 Mates, Michael John (East Hampshire)
 Maude, Rt. Hon. Francis Anthony Aylmer (Horsham)
 Mawhinney, Rt. Hon. Dr. Brian Stanley (North West Cambridgeshire)
 Maxton, John Alston (Glasgow, Cathcart)
 May, Mrs. Theresa Mary (Maidenhead)
 Meacher, Michael Hugh (Oldham, West and Royton)
 Meale, Joseph Alan (Mansfield)
 Merchant, Piers Rolf Garfield (Beckenham)
 Merron, Gillian Joanna (Lincoln)
 Michael, Alun Edward (Cardiff, South and Penarth)
 Michie, Mrs. Janet Ray (Argyll and Bute)
 Michie, William (Sheffield, Heeley)
 Milburn, Alan (Darlington)
 Miller, Andrew Peter (Ellesmere Port and Neston)
 Mitchell, Austin Vernon (Great Grimsby)
 Moffatt, Mrs. Laura Jean (Crawley)
 Moonie, Dr. Lewis George (Kirkcaldy)
 Moore, Michael Kevin (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale)
 Moran, Mrs. Margaret (Luton, South)
 Morgan, Alastair Neil (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale)
 Morgan, Julie (Cardiff, North)
 Morgan, Hywel Rhodri (Cardiff, West)
 Morley, Elliot Anthony (Scunthorpe)
 Morris, Estelle (Birmingham, Yardley)
 Morris, Rt. Hon. John QC (Aberavon)
 Moss, Malcolm Douglas (North East Cambridgeshire)
 Mountford, Kali Carol Jean (Colne Valley)
 Mowlam, Marjorie (Redcar)
 Mudie, George Edward (Leeds, East)
 Mullin, Christopher John (Sunderland, South)
 Murphy, Denis (Wansbeck)
 Murphy, James (Eastwood)
 Murphy, Paul Peter (Torfaen)

N

Naysmith, Dr. John Douglas (Bristol, North-West)
 Nicholls, Patrick Charles Martyn (Teignbridge)
 Norman, Archibald John (Tunbridge Wells)
 Norris, Dan (Wansdyke)

O

Oaten, Mark (Winchester)
 O'Brien, Michael (North Warwickshire)
 O'Brien, William (Normanton)
 O'Hara, Edward (Knowsley, South)
 Olnier, William John (Nuneaton)
 O'Neill, Martin John (Ochil)
 Opik, Lembit (Montgomeryshire)
 Organ, Diana Mary (Forest of Dean)
 Osborne, Sandra Currie (Ayr)
 Ottaway, Richard Geoffrey James (Croydon, South)

P

Page, Richard Lewis (South West Hertfordshire)
 Paice, James Edward Thornton (South East

Cambridgeshire)
 Paisley, Rev. Ian Richard Kyle (North Antrim)
 Palmer, Nicholas Douglas (Bloxhew)
 Paterson, Owen William (North Shropshire)
 Pearson, Ian Phares (Dudley, South)
 Pendry, Thomas (Stalybridge and Hyde)
 Perham, Linda (Ilford, North)
 Pickles, Eric Jack (Brentwood and Ongar)
 Pickthall, Colin (West Lancashire)
 Pike, Peter Leslie (Burnley)
 Plaskitt, James Andrew (Warwick and Leamington)
 Pollard, Kerry Patrick (St. Albans)
 Pond, Christopher Richard (Gravesham)
 Pope, Gregory James (Hyndburn)
 Pound, Stephen Pelham (Ealing, North)
 Powell, Sir Raymond (Ogmore)
 Prentice, Mrs. Bridget Theresa (Lewisham, East)
 Prentice, Gordon (Pendle)
 Prescott, Rt. Hon. John Leslie (Kingston upon Hull, East)
 Primarolo, Dawn (Bristol, South)
 Prior, David Gifford Leathes (North Norfolk)
 Prosser, Gwynfor Mathews (Dover)
 Purchase, Kenneth (Wolverhampton, North East)

Q

Quin, Joyce Gwendolen (Gateshead, East and Washington, West)
 Quinn, Lawrence William (Scarborough and Whitby)

R

Radice, Giles Heneage (North Durham)
 Rammell, William Ernest (Harlow)
 Rapson, Sydney Norman John (Portsmouth, North)
 Raynsford, Wyvill Richard Nicholls (Greenwich and Woolwich)
 Redwood, Rt. Hon. John Alan (Wokingham)
 Reed, Andrew John (Loughborough)
 Reid, Dr. John (Hamilton, North and Bellshill)
 Rendel, David Digby (Newbury)
 Robathan, Andrew Robert George (Blaby)
 Robertson, George Islay MacNeill (Hamilton, South)
 Robertson, Laurence Anthony (Tewkesbury)
 Robinson, Geoffrey (Coventry, North West)
 Robinson, Peter David (Belfast, East)
 Roche, Mrs. Barbara Maureen (Hornsey and Wood Green)
 Roe, Mrs. Marion Audrey (Bloxhew)
 Rogers, Allan Ralph (Rhondda)
 Rooker, Jeffrey William (Birmingham, Perry Barr)
 Rooney, Terence Henry (Bradford, North)
 Ross, Ernest (Dundee, West)
 Ross, William (East Londonderry)
 Rowe, Andrew John Bernard (Faversham and Mid Kent)
 Rowlands, Edward (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney)
 Roy, Frank (Motherwell and Wishaw)
 Ruane, Christopher Shaun (Vale of Clwyd)
 Ruddock, Mrs. Joan Mary (Lewisham, Deptford)
 Ruffley, David Laurie (Bury St. Edmunds)
 Russell, Christine Margaret (City of Chester)
 Russell, Robert Edward (Colchester)
 Ryan, Joan Marie (Enfield, North)

S

St. Aubyn, Nicholas Francis (Guildford)
 Salmond, Alexander Elliot Anderson (Banff and Buchan)
 Salter, Martin John (Reading, West)
 Sanders, Adrian Mark (Torbay)
 Sarwar, Mohammad (Glasgow, Govan)
 Savidge, Malcolm Kemp (Aberdeen, North)
 Sawford, Philip Andrew (Kettering)
 Sayeed, Jonathan (Mid Bedfordshire)
 Sedgemore, Brian Charles John (Hackney, South and Shoreditch)
 Shaw, Jonathan Rowland (Chatham and Aylesford)
 Sheerman, Barry John (Huddersfield)
 Sheldon, Rt. Hon. Robert Edward (Ashton-under-Lyne)
 Shephard, Mrs. Rt. Hon. Gillian Patricia (South West Norfolk)
 Shepherd, Richard Charles Scrimgeour (Aldridge-Brownhills)
 Shersby, Sir Julian Michael (Uxbridge) [*died, May 1997*]
 Shipley, Debra Ann (Stourbridge)
 Short, Clare (Birmingham, Ladywood)
 Simpson, Alan John (Nottingham, South)
 Simpson, Keith Robert (Mid Norfolk)
 Singh, Marsha (Bradford, West)
 Skinner, Dennis Edward (Bolsover)
 Smith, Andrew David (Oxford, East)
 Smith, Angela Evans (Basildon)
 Smith, Christopher Robert (Islington, South and Finsbury)
 Smith, Geraldine (Morecambe and Lunesdale)
 Smith, Jacqueline Jill (Redditch)
 Smith, John William Patrick (Vale of Glamorgan)
 Smith, Llewellyn Thomas (Blaenau Gwent)
 Smith, Sir Robert Hill (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine)
 Smyth, Rev. William Martin (Belfast, South)
 Snape, Peter Charles (West Bromwich, East)
 Soames, Arthur Nicholas Winston (Mid Sussex)
 Soley, Clive Stafford (Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush)
 Southworth, Helen Mary (Warrington, South)
 Spellar, John Francis (Warley)
 Spelman, Mrs. Caroline Alice (Meriden)
 Spicer, Sir Michael William Hardy (West Worcestershire)
 Spring, Richard John Grenville (West Suffolk)
 Squire, Rachel Anne (Dunfermline, West)
 Stanley, Rt. Hon. Sir John Paul (Tonbridge and Malling)
 Starkey, Mrs. Phyllis Margaret (Milton Keynes, South West)
 Steen, Anthony David (Totnes)
 Steinberg, Gerald Neil (City of Durham)
 Stevenson, George William (Stoke-on-Trent, South)
 Stewart, David John (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber)
 Stewart, Ian (Eccles)
 Stinchcombe, Paul David (Wellingborough)
 Stoate, Howard Geoffrey Alvin (Dartford)
 Stott, Roger CBE (Wigan)
 Strang, Dr. Gavin Steel (Edinburgh, East and Musselburgh)
 Straw, John Whitaker (Blackburn)
 Streeter, Gary Nicholas (South West Devon)
 Stringer, Graham Eric (Manchester, Blackley)
 Stuart, Mrs. Gisela Gschaidner (Birmingham, Edgbaston)
 Stunell, Andrew (Hazel Grove)
 Sutcliffe, Gerry (Bradford, South)

Swayne, Desmond Angus (New Forest, West)
 Swinney, John Ramsay (North Tayside)
 Syms, Robert Andrew Raymond (Poole)

T

Tapsell, Sir Peter Hannay Bailey (Louth and Horncastle)
 Taylor, Dari Jean (Stockton, South)
 Taylor, David Leslie (North West Leicestershire)
 Taylor, Sir Edward Macmillan (Rochford and Southend, East)
 Taylor, Ian Colin MBE (Esher and Walton)
 Taylor, Rt. Hon. John David (Strangford)
 Taylor, John Mark (Solihull)
 Taylor, Matthew Owen John (Truro and St. Austell)
 Taylor, Mrs. Winifred Ann (Dewsbury)
 Temple-Morris, Peter (Leominster)
 Thomas, Gareth (Clwyd, West)
 Thomas, Gareth Richard (Harrow, West)
 Thompson, William John (West Tyrone)
 Timms, Stephen Creswell (East Ham)
 Tipping, Simon Patrick (Sherwood)
 Todd, Mark Wainwright (South Derbyshire)
 Tonge, Dr. Jennifer Louise (Richmond Park)
 Touhig, James Donnelly (Islwyn)
 Townend, John Ernest (East Yorkshire)
 Tredinnick, David Arthur Stephen (Bosworth)
 Trend, Michael St. John (Windsor)
 Trickett, Jon Hedley (Hemsworth)
 Trimble, David (Upper Bann)
 Truswell, Paul Anthony (Pudsey)
 Turner, Dennis (Wolverhampton, South East)
 Turner, Desmond Stanley (Brighton, Kemptown)
 Turner, George (North West Norfolk)
 Twigg, John Derek (Halton)
 Twigg, Stephen (Enfield, Southgate)
 Tyler, Paul Archer CBE (North Cornwall)
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OFFICIAL REPORT

IN THE FIRST SESSION OF THE FIFTY-SECOND PARLIAMENT OF THE
UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND
[WHICH OPENED 7 MAY 1997]

FORTY-SIXTH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II

SIXTH SERIES

VOLUME 294

FIRST VOLUME OF SESSION 1997-98

House of Commons

Wednesday 7 May 1997

The House being met; and it being the first day of the meeting of this Parliament, pursuant to Proclamation, DONALD WILLIAM LIMON, ESQUIRE, CB, Clerk of the House of Commons, WILLIAM ROBERT McKAY, ESQUIRE, CB, Clerk Assistant, and GEORGE CUBIE, ESQUIRE, Principal Clerk of the Table Office, attending in the House, and the other Clerks attending, according to their duty, SIR THOMAS STUART LEGG, KCB, QC, Clerk of the Crown in Chancery in Great Britain, delivered to the said DONALD WILLIAM LIMON a book containing a list of the names of the Members returned to serve in this Parliament.

Several of the Members repaired to their seats.

THE RIGHT HON. SIR EDWARD HEATH took the Chair, pursuant to Standing Order No. 1 (Election of the Speaker).

Message to attend the Lords Commissioners.

The House went; and a Commission having been read for opening and holding the Parliament, the Lords Commissioners directed the House to proceed to the Election of a Speaker, and to present the Speaker-Elect tomorrow, in the House of Peers, for the Royal Approbation.

And the House having returned:—

Election of Speaker

2.49 pm

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): Sir Edward, this is a truly beautiful day. The sun is shining, God is in his heaven, and I am happy to see a majority of the House of Commons wearing the right colours.

The lady whom I have the honour to propose as Speaker of this august House, the right hon. Member for West Bromwich, West (Miss Boothroyd), fought a unique election campaign, wearing a green rosette. One very rarely has the opportunity to introduce to one's colleagues, so many of them new to the House, a person of such sterling value and remarkable ability.

Many here, perhaps those who have arrived for the first time today, will think that they know our Speaker, because they know her public persona as a witty, hard-hitting Yorkshirewoman who is very much in charge and keeps us all in our place. That, of course, is what she does, but behind that public persona is another person who is much valued by all Members of the House of Commons, from all parties. She understands not only our abilities but our frailties. Unlike some here, she got here only after five attempts.

For all that, when the right hon. Lady came here, she had such a lot to contribute that she soon began to make her mark. As many of us know, she worked here in the Palace in all sorts of capacities, and for some remarkably modest people such as Barbara Castle and Geoffrey de Freitas. She learned many skills from the people with whom she worked when she first came into the House.

The right hon. Lady had to wait a certain amount of time, not least because even some members of the organisation committee of the Labour party had the effrontery to tell her that she should be a little older before trying to be a Member of Parliament; I do not know what they would have done with the present candidates list. She got here, however, because the people of West Bromwich recognised in her an outstanding woman.

[Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody]

The right hon. Lady has served the House for what seems to me a very short time, but she has done so with intelligence, ability and remarkable tolerance. She understands, because she has been in our Whips Office, every trick that we can use and change that we can make to get what we want. She understands the importance of the procedures of the House which, though sometimes arcane, contribute to the delivery of free speech. Above all, she is the person who protects that free speech, because to her the importance of the House of Commons lies in its ability to speak for the people, to be their voice and to represent them.

The right hon. Lady has had a rather different election campaign from some of us. I do not think that, like me, she had a gentleman falling out of a pub at her feet and asking what she intended to do for the alcoholic vote. I had to say, "Not a great deal." However, I was comforted to learn his politics when he reeled away into the distance shouting, "Hope you lose."

In spite of the fact that, in a return to a much older and more dignified procedure, the right hon. Lady did not have quite so many opponents, she comes to the House as one of the most lively and caring Members of Parliament. Hon. Members may not know that she takes her role as chief Speaker of the Commonwealth—if I may call her that—as a great duty. She not only has a public persona in Britain but is well known all over the Commonwealth. She welcomes people of every nationality, colour and religion throughout her working term to show them what we do, why it is important and why that tradition of democracy needs to be spread even further. She not only welcomes individuals but is a very gregarious character. Those of us who have the privilege of counting her among our friends know that she tries to spread friendship, kindness and understanding among Members of parties of all sizes and shapes, and now even between different genders.

Sir Edward, you and I have seen one or two summers, but we 21-year-olds know how to appreciate the important things of life. It is therefore a great privilege and a great honour for me to propose to the House of Commons that its Speaker be the right hon. Member for West Bromwich, West.

2.55 pm

Mr. John MacGregor (South Norfolk): Sir Edward, may I say how delighted we are that you are back as leader—[*Interruption.*—as Father of the House. You have given distinguished service to the country, always as a true parliamentarian and, above all, as a House of Commons man. We all wish you well in your continuing endeavours both in Parliament and in serving your constituency in the whole of the lifetime of this Parliament.

The last time that I met the right hon. Member for West Bromwich, West (Miss Boothroyd) was just before the dissolution of the last Parliament when we were together late at night, in very convivial circumstances, arm in arm, in a chorus line singing, "We'll meet again." More of that later, but little did I think then that when we met again, I would have the great pleasure and privilege of seconding the proposal that she should again be our Speaker.

I would like to make three points. First, those of us who were in the last Parliament know already the right hon. Lady's many sterling qualities, which is why she is

our unanimous choice as Speaker, without the need for an election. She has been vigorous and sometimes quite necessarily tough—and I am delighted that she has been—but always with good humour. She has been firm, but always fair. She has always protected the rights of hon. Members on both sides of the House and, in particular, those of Back Benchers.

When the House was dissolved at the end of the last Parliament, my successor as Leader of the House paid a tribute to the right hon. Lady. Leaders of the House come to know Speakers very well, as I came to know the right hon. Lady's predecessor well. The tribute did not surprise me, because we all came to regard with admiration the qualities that I have described.

Secondly, I have always been a strong advocate of reforming the House of Commons to ensure that it is as effective as possible and keeps up to date. I have always been a firm believer in the high reputation of this House. There is no more honourable position for anyone than to be a Member of it. In both those respects, the right hon. Lady carried forward splendidly those objectives during the last Parliament. She, among others, helped to implement the Jopling reforms, which I believe have made us much more effective and which I was delighted to initiate when I was Leader of the House. She has undoubtedly ensured that the reputation of this House has been protected.

I am saddened—like others, I am sure—at the apparent decline of the reputation of the House of Commons and of Members of Parliament. I say "apparent", because I believe that much of the excellent work that is done in the House and for the integrity of the House is not translated sufficiently to the world at large. Sometimes the antics in the Chamber form an impression among people outside of what the House is like. It is up to all of us to exercise discipline in the Chamber to ensure that the right message goes abroad. The right hon. Member for West Bromwich, West did much to ensure that the reputation of the House was protected by presiding over our proceedings in the last Parliament in the way that she did.

To follow the lead of the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody), may I say what a splendid job the right hon. Member for West Bromwich, West has done as ambassador for the House in the country and in the rest of the world. We greatly respect that.

I return to the point with which I started. I am not sure that the right hon. Member for West Bromwich, West likes this to be mentioned too often, because she does it often in private and without fanfare, but one of the things that new Members of the House will discover is that, after all the passionate debate and vigorous disagreement, there is much friendliness and camaraderie on both sides of the House. The right hon. Lady did much to promote that during the last Parliament by hosting dinners and happy occasions in the Speaker's Chambers, from which so many of us benefited.

The right hon. Member for West Bromwich, West and I share a particular interest in that we both have a great love of the old variety music hall. I was—I am not sure what is the right word—lucky or perhaps foolish enough to perform three times in those events. They were tremendous events and great fun. I remember on the last occasion someone from the Labour party, who is now a member of the Government saying at about 11 o'clock in the evening, "If only others around the country could see

what happens in the House and the way in which we have gathered together for a friendly occasion, what a different view they might take of us." Certainly the right hon. Lady has done much to promote that.

So the right hon. Member for West Bromwich, West has many of the qualities that we seek in a Speaker. There is no greater honour that the House can bestow on one of its number than to accept her as Speaker of the House. It is a role which is so important in upholding our democratic traditions, but it is no easy task. In having the great pleasure to second the right hon. Lady as Speaker of the House, I am sure that I speak for everyone in wishing her well in doing the job in this Parliament.

3.1 pm

Mr. Tony Benn (Chesterfield): Sir Edward, you and I have sat under eight Speakers and I should like to endorse everything that has been said by the hon. and right hon. Members who moved and seconded the motion to elect my right hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich, West (Miss Boothroyd) as Speaker of the House of Commons. Everything that they said about her is true, and I support it.

I must ask the indulgence of the House because I have not spoken as a Government Back Benchers since 1 August 1951 and, like every Government Back Benchers, I have been sitting by my telephone since the election. I can honestly claim that it is my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister's special wish that I should remain in the position that I now occupy.

Before my right hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich, West resumes the Chair, perhaps she will allow me to look at the role of the Speaker against the changing circumstances of the House of Commons.

Fifty years ago, the House controlled hundreds of millions of people in Asia and Africa. We even controlled the Bank of England at that time. Since then, many changes have occurred. I believe that, in the years that lie ahead, the function of the Speaker will be of crucial importance, for the following reasons. First, this Parliament will sit alongside a Scottish Parliament. That, I strongly welcome. It will sit alongside a Welsh Assembly, which I also strongly support. It will be sitting alongside a House of Lords, the hereditary element of which will have gone—a point on which I have, in the past, made some minor contribution. It will also have to come to terms with new relations with Europe, whatever form they take. I believe that the role of the Speaker in maintaining the central position of this House during that period will be of the very greatest importance.

There are also other powers with which we have to deal. For example, in relation to the global economy, there is the growing power of Mr. Dow Jones, who gives orders to most people in the world with his industrial averages, which are drawn up long after we go to bed, and which are taken very seriously by the Chancellor. We will have to deal with the role of the media and their enormous power. In the old days they reported us. Now they occupy our Palace in order to interview each other to explain what it is we are supposed to be saying to each other. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear!"] If we are going to have open government, what about breaking up that incestuous little system known as the Lobby system under which people talk to each other anonymously and cause trouble to other people who never meant what they were said to have said at the time the leak occurred? There is a great deal of work to be done in that respect.

May I say one final word to the new Speaker? It is very rare that one can talk to the Speaker as a colleague before she occupies a position of such great importance. The nation elects a Government; every constituency elects a representative—each has quite a different function. The Government have to govern but we come here because we have been sent here from constituencies that have special problems. We come with our own convictions—believe it or not, we are all free men and women who can speak what we believe to be the case. [Interruption.] I know from my experience of her occupancy of the Chair that the Speaker's task in picking the Members she chooses to call will be based upon her deep conviction that the House is at its best when diversity and plurality of opinion is expressed without any abuse of a personal character, but arising from the deep conviction that leads us to come here. We are elected not in spite of our opinions but because of them.

3.6 pm

Miss Betty Boothroyd (West Bromwich, West): It is just five years, Sir Edward, since I was able to address you in this way for the very first time. Then, I congratulated you upon your knighthood. Now, here we are, a Parliament later, and I have pleasure again in congratulating you, for two reasons. First, I congratulate you on being the Father of the House once more. To occupy that position in two successive Parliaments is something which I doubt we shall see repeated. I must also mention your successful return to the House. Your general election record now reads, "Contested 14: 14 not out." That is another feat that it will be very difficult to emulate.

Some hon. Members were not even born, Sir Edward, when you entered the Commons—the present Prime Minister and the Chancellor of the Exchequer are only two of them.

You have seen seven previous Speakers occupy that Chair and now, as the eighth, I submit myself once again to the will of this House in accordance with the ancient custom. In so doing, I wish to express my thanks to my Deputies, all three of whom, for different reasons, are no longer Members. Mr. Michael Morris, who was our Chairman of Ways and Means, had the task of selecting amendments and chairing Committee stages of Bills that were taken on the Floor of the House. The Maastricht Bill had to be debated in this Chamber, of course, because it was a constitutional issue. It was more than that: it was a highly controversial issue. It says much for the skills and the patience of Michael Morris that, at the end of its lengthy proceedings, he was congratulated on his chairmanship by Members on both sides of the European divide. I shall miss him greatly.

I also want to pay tribute to the two other Deputy Speakers, Dame Janet Fookes and Sir Geoffrey Lofthouse. They abandoned their previous party loyalties and displayed impartiality and dedication through many an arduous sitting. The House owes much to those two former colleagues.

I express my personal gratitude to those who proposed and seconded my re-election and to those who have spoken in support of it. The hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) and I have known each other over many years. We have worked together in the House. We worked together on my former party's national executive committee, and also in the European Parliament. I am greatly touched that, after all that proximity, the hon. Lady still speaks of me with warmth and affection.

[Miss Betty Boothroyd]

The right hon. Member for South Norfolk (Mr. MacGregor) is equally well known both inside and outside the House. Perhaps it is not so well known that the right hon. Gentleman is an expert magician, who helped to fund his way through university as a professional conjuror. John MacGregor's ability to pull things unexpectedly out of the hat helped to make him such a successful Minister and Leader of the House. Thank you very much, John.

I extend a warm welcome and congratulations to all 260 new Members. I hope soon to be able to put a name to a personality. I am sure, however, that new Members will understand that it will be difficult to achieve that in a short time. No Speaker in memory has been confronted with such a task. Fitting names to faces will form part of my homework in the days ahead.

Ten years ago this summer, Sir Edward, I vividly remember hearing my immediate predecessor appeal for shorter speeches in the Chamber. Things do not change very much but, thanks to the continued operation of the 10-minute limit, some progress has been made. However, I repeat the plea for self-restraint by hon. Members. I give them the assurance that short speeches that are concentrated and well argued are the far more effective. I know that that applies to supplementary questions. The most effective supplementary question that I ever heard came from a Member sitting on the Opposition Benches. He rose and uttered one word. He said, "Why?" I have never seen such consternation on the face of a Minister. As Eric Morecambe would have said, "There's no answer to that."

What else can I suggest to hon. Members? I read recently the advice that George Washington—a very hot-tempered man—gave himself. The first President of the United States wrote:

"Use no reproachful language against anyone, neither curse nor revile".

The Chair can deal with curses if they are outrageous, and it has done so. The banning of all reproaches and even the occasional reviling would, however, be a counsel of perfection. Nevertheless, let me remind all hon. Members that good temper and moderate language are the characteristics of a good parliamentarian.

When I was elected Speaker five years ago, Sir Edward, I promised to respect the rights of all hon. Members regardless of their office or lack of office, irrespective of their party, and to be aware always of the supreme duty of the Speaker to safeguard the traditions of the House, abandoning all previous commitments and being content only to serve the House. Those were my aims five years ago, and they constitute a pledge that I give again today.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That Miss Betty Boothroyd do take the Chair of this House as Speaker.

Whereupon SIR EDWARD HEATH *left the Chair, and* MISS BETTY BOOTHROYD *was taken out of her place and conducted to the Chair by* MR. JOHN MACGREGOR *and* MRS. GWYNETH DUNWOODY.

Madam Speaker-Elect (*standing on the upper step*): Before I take the Chair as Speaker-Elect, I wish, of course, to thank the House for the honour that it has again bestowed on me. I am aware that it is the greatest honour it can give to any one of its Members. I pray that I shall justify its continued confidence, and I propose to do all within my power to preserve and to cherish its traditions.

3.15 pm

The Prime Minister (Mr. Tony Blair): Madam Speaker-Elect, I rise to congratulate you on securing the unanimous and well-deserved support of every part of this House. Your election five years ago marked an historic turning point in the 600 years of your noble office, when you became this House's first woman Speaker. Every action that you have taken since then has confirmed us in our good opinion of you.

As you said, Madam Speaker-Elect, there are many new faces for you to get used to—indeed, there are many new faces for me to get used to, and some old ones. I am absolutely delighted that the lead that you demonstrated those five years ago in becoming the first woman Speaker has brought us to a point today where there are more women than ever before sitting in this House—120. It is an excellent start, although I am sure that some will feel that there is still room for improvement.

All Speakers are elected to speak for, and represent, this House and, in the modern television age, that responsibility is more daunting than ever before. Today, you are admired and respected throughout the world—for example, I understand that, in Japan among cable television viewers, you have a fervent cult following. In the United States, there is a cable television station that is dedicated to Prime Minister's Questions—there is no accounting for taste—and there is no doubt at all who has been the star of that show: it is neither the Prime Minister nor the Leader of the Opposition, but yourself as Madam Speaker.

Over the past five years, Madam Speaker-Elect, you have made a number of rulings from the Chair to guide our conduct. They have covered the full spectrum of parliamentary affairs—from the relationship between Parliament and the courts to, of course, the behaviour of individual Members of Parliament. In the last Parliament, you had the rare experience for a Speaker of having to give your casting vote. I hope that I shall not be accused of complacency when I say that I hope that that is not to be repeated in this Parliament. I have also asked new Ministers to take careful note of your strictures against electronic pagers and mobile phones. They will be switched off so that no overly eager member of the media can contact Ministers for the time that they are in the Chamber. We are considering extending that to all 24 hours of the day.

The right hon. Member for South Norfolk (Mr. MacGregor) and my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) have eloquently set out why this House is right to re-elect you, Madam Speaker-Elect. Their speeches, although formal for this occasion, showed the absolutely sincere and genuine feeling that hon. Members on both sides of the House have for you. It is a great achievement on your part that they feel that way. There is your total unflappability and your quick wit which, on occasions, we admire and from which, on other occasions, we suffer; and your command of the Chamber and authority.

What all of us who have experienced your chairmanship and speakership in the House over the past few years would say is that, most of all, you are genuinely a lover of this Parliament and a respecter of it. You believe in it, you cherish it, you protect its Members and I think that I speak for everyone here when I say that you have always shown total impartiality—no fear or favour to anyone. We cannot say higher praise than that.

Madam Speaker-Elect, whatever aspersions have been cast on the conduct of Members, and whatever concerns people feel from time to time as they watch the debates of the House or Prime Minister's questions, no one has ever doubted your dignity, your integrity or your capacity to do your job well. In the weeks before the last Parliament ended, the House was sometimes a little fraught; you called it "pre-election tension." However, throughout that time, you never lost your authority or good humour or your ability to put us in our places while retaining the absolute respect of the House.

Madam Speaker-Elect, it is my duty to praise you but it is also my pleasure to praise you. It is praise that you have well earned and will continue to earn.

3.19 pm

Mr. John Major (Huntingdon): Madam Speaker-Elect, I am delighted to join the Prime Minister in congratulating you on your re-election to the Chair following the excellent speeches by the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) and my right hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk (Mr. MacGregor), and a cherished contribution by the right hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn).

When you first became our Speaker, you did so with substantial cross-party support. Your success is shown by the fact that you were re-elected today without opposition and with cross-party acclamation. We are all delighted to see you back in the Chair of our House. I know that in that Chair you will continue to display for all of us—long-serving Members and new Members alike—the qualities that have been evident in the past few years: fairness, common sense and, when needed, as sometimes in a fractious House it is, a touch of toughness distilled with good humour, to keep the order that is necessary to allow our debates to flow properly.

This House is a house of tradition, and it is a good tradition that in a new Parliament we meet first with a single common purpose—the election of our Speaker. In a Parliament in which—who knows?—many disputes may lie ahead, it is comforting to begin on a matter on which there is complete unanimity: to restore you to the Chair of our proceedings.

We in the House expect a great deal of our Speaker. The job specification is pretty daunting: the patience of Job and the wisdom of Solomon are only the basic requirements. We demand also impartiality, independence and fairness. We also like the Speaker to call us when we wish to speak and never to call those that we do not especially wish to hear. Sadly, Madam Speaker-Elect, you occasionally disappoint us on both counts from time to time, and we all have to get used to that.

Of course, the Speaker must also tolerantly accept the patently bogus points of order that are raised from time to time, and do so with a limited air of patience.

Madam Speaker-Elect, if I may be permitted to interject a note of controversy about an old friend, the appointment to office of the new Minister for Sport may slightly reduce your burden in that respect.

It may be thought that it would be impossible for a House to produce such a paragon to govern its affairs, yet it does, and has in the past. In the past five years, Madam Speaker-Elect, it has become obvious that it has done so yet again.

It is often said in the House that the rights of Back Benchers are as sacred as those of Front Benchers. It is usually said by Back Benchers, and invariably Front Benchers pay lip service to that principle. I find myself in a unique position in the House. There are lots of Front Benchers, and even more Back Benchers who wish to be Front Benchers; I am a Front Bencher who wishes in due course to become a Back Bencher, so let me assert that the rights of Back Benchers are as important as those of Front Benchers. On Front Bench or Back Bench, Madam Speaker-Elect, I am happy to leave my fate in your safe hands.

Madam Speaker-Elect, the House has always expected a great deal of its Speaker. Of one of your 19th-century predecessors it was said:

"The manner in which he lives—his house, his table, his demeanour—render his receptions the most pleasing and magnificent possible".

Today—in that respect, at least—we are a little less demanding. I promise you that we do not expect to be feasted on fish, fowl and claret at the end of each of our debates—in that sense, you are better off.

The bargain cuts both ways, does it not? How much better off are we today than the House was under another of your predecessors, Mr. Speaker Manners Sutton, whose initial qualities for being Speaker were that he

"never . . . appeared to pay any attention to the privileges or orders of the House"?

As to his knowledge of Parliament, it was said:

"Some inconvenience will at first arise from his want of knowledge".

More chaos than inconvenience, I would think from my experience of this House.

I warmly welcome all the new Members of Parliament from all parties to what is I believe the most remarkable institution in the world. I hope that they will enjoy their stay here, however long or short it may be. None of the new or old Members who has followed the proceedings of the House under your guidance, Madam Speaker-Elect, would say anything other than how fortunate we are to have your knowledge, your industry and your almost unflinching good humour at our service.

Today, your office is both much more demanding and much more professional than it has been at any stage in our long history. You are charged with protecting the rights of the House and with imposing good order, even in moments of high drama. Whether we are Front Benchers or Back Benchers, we owe it to you to help you to do so. We owe it to you in the interests of good debate, good order and the reputation of this House. Madam Speaker-Elect, may good fortune always attend you. I wish you every satisfaction in carrying out the duties of your historic office.

3.26 pm

Mr. Paddy Ashdown (Yeovil): Madam Speaker-Elect, it gives me great pleasure on behalf of those on these Benches to congratulate you on your re-election. I am sure that you will understand that for me to be able to use the phrase "these Benches" on this occasion—with the same feeling, but with a little more accuracy than I used it before—also gives me pleasure.

As the Leader of the Opposition has just said, the fact that you were re-elected to this House and in this House without opposition or dissent is a testimony to the respect in which you are held. For our part, we know you from the last Parliament as a stern defender of minority rights, especially when those minorities were large minorities. The wisdom and skill that you have used will again be greatly in need of application, given the new balance of power in this House of Commons—not the least factor of which is the much larger representation from my party.

On Thursday of last week, the people of Britain voted for change. I hope that this Parliament will be a Parliament of change—a change to our institutions, a change, I hope, to our constitution and a change to the culture and the way in which we conduct our business in this House. I hope that it will be an historic Parliament which becomes known as a great Parliament of reform. If it is to be so, we will—in this Parliament, as in the last—depend heavily on your skill and wisdom to guide us through what will be a momentous and historic Parliament. We know that those gifts for which you have been re-elected will fail neither you nor us in the period ahead, and we wish you well and congratulate you on your re-election.

3.28 pm

Mrs. Margaret Ewing (Moray): On behalf of the joint Scottish National party-Plaid Cymru group, I briefly echo the congratulations that have been tendered to you, Madam Speaker-Elect. I well recall that, at the beginning of the last Parliament, you very much appreciated that the smaller parties had all supported your election to the Chair. The fairness and objectivity that you displayed towards us showed that you recognised our support.

This Parliament will be dominated by constitutional affairs affecting Scotland and Wales, as well as the European dimension. It is not our intention to be an awkward squad in any way, but—on behalf of all of my colleagues—I recognise that you will appreciate the various views that will come forward from all parts of the House. We know that the door to your office will always be open for discussion about what may be complex issues. We wish you very well in this Parliament.

3.29 pm

Mr. David Trimble (Upper Bann): It is with great pleasure that I rise to endorse much of what has been said already and to express on behalf of the Ulster Unionist party our pleasure at seeing you, Madam Speaker-Elect, re-elected as Speaker. Indeed, it confirms—as the past five years have confirmed—that our decision five years ago was right. We look forward to the next five

years under your speakership. In saying that, I merely wish to endorse what has been said so eloquently by many other hon. Members.

May I add a little note of qualification to the comments made by the right hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn) and by the hon. Member for Moray (Mrs. Ewing)? The changes that we shall see in the course of the next five years with regard to Europe and the regions of the United Kingdom include changes that we expect to see with regard to the region of the United Kingdom that we represent. We expect to see solid progress there and that the same quality of democracy enjoyed by the rest of the United Kingdom will be enjoyed also by the people whom we represent.

In those terms, we look forward to this Parliament as an opportunity. We do so confident in the fact that, as a small party on the Opposition Benches, we can rely on your fairness and impartiality as we have over the past five years.

3.30 pm

Rev. Ian Paisley (North Antrim): I congratulate you, Madam Speaker-Elect, on your election to the speakership of this ancient and honourable House of Commons.

In the last Parliament, I was one of the few Members whom you had to order out. That experience was not new to me as a parliamentarian, but I shall never forget it. I know that you held nothing against me afterwards and I can assure you that I had no cause to complain because the events that unfolded afterwards proved my point. However, at the start of this Parliament, when the most serious matters relating to that part of the United Kingdom that I come from—Northern Ireland—will be on the agenda, my party, although small, will be most happy to know that you will preside here.

I endorse everything that has been said concerning your past conduct towards small parties. Your record on defending minority parties is well known. You know the moods of the House and of its Members, and our deep feelings when certain matters are discussed. Your rule has always been strong but sympathetic; it has always been robust but reasonable. We know that you will treat all parties—especially minority parties—in the House as you have treated them in the past. I believe that, in the coming days, through your conduct and control of this House, you will write other great chapters in your speakership.

It has been well said that it is easier to control outsiders than members of your own family. That will be your task in this House. Having done so well in a previous House, I know that you are well able to do that job, and I wish you well.

ADJOURNMENT

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—[Mr. McAvoy.]

MADAM SPEAKER-ELECT *thereupon put the Question, which being agreed to, the House adjourned accordingly until tomorrow, and MADAM SPEAKER-ELECT went away without the Mace before her.*

Adjourned accordingly at twenty-eight minutes to Four o'clock.

House of Commons

Thursday 8 May 1997

*The House being met at half-past Two o'clock, and
MADAM SPEAKER-ELECT having taken the Chair;*

Message to attend the Lords Commissioners;

The House went; and, having returned—

Election of Speaker

Madam Speaker: I have to report to the House that, in the House of Peers, Her Majesty, by Her Royal Commissioners, has been pleased to approve the choice made of myself for the Office of Speaker, and that I have, in your name and on your behalf, made claim by humble petition to Her Majesty to all your ancient and undoubted rights and privileges, particularly to freedom of speech in debate, freedom from arrest and freedom of access to Her Majesty whenever occasion may require, and that the most favourable construction may be placed upon all your proceedings. All these Her Majesty, by Her Commissioners, has been pleased to confirm in as ample a manner as they have ever been granted or confirmed by herself or by any of Her Royal Predecessors.

My first duty to the House is to report my respectful acknowledgments and my grateful thanks for the great honour you have conferred upon me in placing me in the Chair.

Members Sworn

Madam Speaker: I must now call upon the Members of the House, according to the usual custom, to take the Oath of Allegiance at the Table of the House, but first I must do so myself.

Thereupon MADAM SPEAKER first, alone, standing upon the upper step of the Chair, took and subscribed the Oath.

Madam Speaker: Before Members proceed to the taking of the Oath, I regret to have to report to the House the death of Sir Michael Shersby, Member for Uxbridge. I am sure that hon. Members on both sides of the House will join me in mourning the loss of a colleague and extending sympathy to the hon. Member's family and his friends.

It may be for the convenience of the House if I indicate my intentions with regard to the taking of the Oath by right hon and hon. Members. I propose to call, first, the Father of the House; then the Cabinet; then the shadow Cabinet; then all the Privy Councillors not included in those two groups, wherever they may be sitting, and then other Ministers. Thereafter I shall call other hon. Members according to seniority determined by the basis of seniority, that is by the Parliament of first entry or, for those with broken service, that of most recent entry.

The first batch will be those elected in or before 1974. Thereafter I shall proceed by successive Parliaments. I hope by late this afternoon to have made sufficient progress to enable all Members to swear in who wish to do so up to and including those elected to the 1992 Parliament. The House will sit again tomorrow at 9.30, when I shall call those Members first elected to the current Parliament as well as Members elected to earlier Parliaments who were not able to take the Oath today.

Finally, the House will meet again next Tuesday at 2.30 to enable Members to take the Oath who have not done so this week.

I hope that this announcement will be helpful to Members in planning their programmes. Progress will depend, of course, on the number of Members wishing to take the Oath at any particular time. I advise Members to watch the announciators to establish progress and to speak to their Whips. I hope also that Members will come forward in an orderly manner. Let us now begin.

The following Members took and subscribed the Oath, or made and subscribed the Affirmation required by law:

Right honourable Sir Edward Richard George Heath, KG, MBE, Old Bexley and Sidcup

Right honourable Anthony Charles Lynton Blair, Sedgfield

Right honourable John Major, Huntingdon

Right honourable John Leslie Prescott, Kingston upon Hull, East

Right honourable Winifred Ann, Mrs. Taylor, Dewsbury

Right honourable Robert Finlayson Cook, Livingston

Right honourable James Gordon Brown, Dunfermline, East

Right honourable John Whitaker Straw, Blackburn

Right honourable Margaret Mary, Mrs. Beckett, Derby, South

[Madam Speaker]

Right honourable Gavin Steel Strang, Edinburgh, East and Musselburgh

Right honourable David George Clark, South Shields

Right honourable Marjorie Mowlam, Redcar

Right honourable George Islay MacNeill Robertson, Hamilton, South

Right honourable Alistair Maclean Darling, Edinburgh, Central

Right honourable Ronald Davies, Caerphilly

Right honourable John Anderson Cunningham, Copeland

Right honourable Frank Gordon Dobson, Holborn and St. Pancras

Right honourable Clare Short, Birmingham, Ladywood

Right honourable David Blunkett, Sheffield, Brightside

Right honourable Harriet Ruth Harman, Camberwell and Peckham

Right honourable Christopher Robert Smith, Islington, South and Finsbury

Right honourable Donald Campbell Dewar, Glasgow, Anniesland

Right honourable Kenneth Harry Clarke QC, Rushcliffe

Right honourable Nicholas Hugh Brown, Newcastle upon Tyne, East and Wallsend

Right honourable Brian Stanley Mawhinney, North-West Cambridgeshire

Right honourable Michael Howard QC, Folkestone and Hythe

Right honourable Alistair Robertson Goodlad, Eddisbury

Right honourable Douglas Martin Hogg QC, Sleaford and North Hykeham

Right honourable Gillian Patricia, Mrs. Shephard, South-West Norfolk

Right honourable Peter Bruce Lilley, Hitchin and Harpenden

Right honourable William Jefferson Hague, Richmond, Yorks

Right honourable Jeremy John Durham Ashdown, Yeovil

Right honourable Alan James Beith, Berwick-upon-Tweed

Right honourable Gerald Bernard Kaufman, Manchester, Gorton

Right honourable Robert Edward Sheldon, Ashton under Lyne

Right honourable Anthony Neil Wedgwood Benn, Chesterfield

Right honourable Alan John Williams, Swansea, West

Right honourable Sir Peter Frank Hannibal Emery, East Devon

Right honourable Sir Peter Robert Cable Lloyd, Fareham

Right honourable David John Maclean, Penrith and The Border

Right honourable David Maurice Curry, Skipton and Ripon

Right honourable David Michael Davis, Haltemprice and Howden

Right honourable Eric Forth, Bromley and Chislehurst

Right honourable John David Taylor, Strangford

Right honourable John Michael Jack, Fylde

Right honourable Michael Ancram, Devizes

Francis Anthony Aylmer Maude, esquire, Horsham

Right honourable Ann Noreen Widdecombe, Maidstone and The Weald

Right honourable Peter Leonard Brooke CH, Cities of London and Westminster

Right honourable Sir John Paul Stanley, Tonbridge and Malling

Reverend Ian Richard Kyle Paisley, North Antrim

Dafydd Wigley, esquire, Caernarfon

Margaret Anne, Mrs. Ewing, Moray

Winston James Griffiths, esquire, Bridgend

Samuel Laird Gallbraith, esquire, Strathkelvin and Bearsden

Peter Kilfoyle, esquire, Liverpool, Walton

Walton John Hume, esquire, Foyle

John McFall, esquire, Dumbarton

Jonathan Owen Jones, esquire, Cardiff, Central

Peter Gerald Hain, esquire, Neath

George Foulkes, esquire, Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley

James Patrick Dowd, esquire, Lewisham, West

Jane Elizabeth, Mrs. Kennedy, Liverpool, Wavertree

Gregory James Pope, esquire, Hyndburn

Bridget Theresa, Mrs. Prentice, Lewisham, East

Kim Scott Howells, esquire, Pontypridd

Right honourable Thomas Jeremy King CH, Bridgwater

Graham William Allen, esquire, Nottingham, North

Keith John Charles Bradley, esquire, Manchester, Withington

Robert William Ainsworth, esquire, Coventry, North-East

Sir Peter Hannay Bailey Tapsell, Louth and Horncastle

Robert Adam Ross MacLennan, esquire, Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross

Alan Thomas Howarth, esquire, CBE, Newport, East

Paul Yaw Boateng, esquire, Brent, South

Malcolm George Richardson Chisholm, esquire, Edinburgh, North and Leith

Geoffrey William Hoon, esquire, Ashfield

Kevin Michael Hughes, esquire, Doncaster, North

John Francis Spellar, esquire, Warley

Anthony Worthington, esquire, Clydebank and Milngavie

Estelle Morris, Birmingham, Yardley

Thomas McLaughlin McAvoy, esquire, Glasgow, Rutherglen

Clive James Charles Betts, esquire, Sheffield, Attercliffe

Elliot Anthony Morley, esquire, Scunthorpe

Sir Richard Bernard Frank Stewart Body, Boston and Skegness

Stephen Barry Jones, esquire, Alyn and Deeside

Dennis Edward Skinner, esquire, Bolsover

Thomas Michael Cox, esquire, Tooting
 Sir William David Madel, South-West Bedfordshire
 Sir Patrick Thomas Cormack, South Staffordshire
 Nicholas Raymond Winterton, esquire, Macclesfield
 Roger Stott, esquire, CBE, Wigan
 Sir William Michael Hardy Spicer, West Worcestershire
 Bruce Thomas George, esquire, Walsall, South
 Andrew Francis Bennett, esquire, Denton and Reddish
 Dennis Andrew Canavan, esquire, Falkirk, West
 William Ross, esquire, East Londonderry
 Right honourable Sir Geoffrey Johnson-Smith, Wealden
 Sir Raymond William Whitney OBE, Wycombe
 John David Home Robertson, esquire, East Lothian
 Brian Charles Sedgemore, esquire, Hackney, South and
 Shoreditch
 Sir Alan Gordon Barraclough Haselhurst, Saffron Walden
 Richard Lewis Page, esquire, South-West Hertfordshire
 Giles Heneage Radice, esquire, North Durham
 Dale Norman Campbell-Savours, esquire, Workington
 David Marshall, esquire, Glasgow, Shettleston
 Ernest Ross, esquire, Dundee, West
 John Alston Maxton, esquire, Glasgow, Cathcart
 Lawrence Francis Cunliffe, esquire, Leigh
 Sir Sydney Brookes Chapman, Chipping Barnet
 Martin John O'Neill, esquire, Ochil
 Sir Raymond Powell, Omore
 Andrew Welsh, esquire, Angus
 David Julian Winnick, esquire, Walsall, North
 Michael John Martin, esquire, Glasgow, Springburn
 Sir Edward Macmillan Taylor, Rochford and Southend,
 East
 Michael Keith Beale Colvin, esquire, Romsey
 James Marshall, esquire, Leicester, South
 Clive Stafford Soley, esquire, Ealing, Acton and
 Shepherds Bush
 Richard Charles Scrimgeour Shepherd, esquire,
 Aldridge-Brownhills
 John Arbutnot Du Cane Wilkinson, esquire,
 Ruislip-Northwood
 John David McWilliam, esquire, Blaydon
 Frank Field, esquire, Birkenhead
 Reverend William Martin Smyth, Belfast, South
 Right honourable Stephen James Dorrell, Charnwood
 Marion Audrey, Mrs. Roe, Broxbourne
 Archibald Johnstone Kirkwood, esquire, Roxburgh and
 Berwickshire
 Simon Robert Key, esquire, Salisbury
 Roger James Gale, esquire, North Thanet
 Charles Frederick Wardle, esquire, Bexhill and Battle
 Jane Ann, Mrs. Winterton, Congleton
 Clifford Forsythe, esquire, South Antrim
 Alfred Cecil Walker, esquire, Belfast, North
 William Michie, esquire, Sheffield, Heeley
 Roy Beggs, esquire, East Antrim

Andrew James MacKay, esquire, Bracknell
 John Valentine Butterfill, esquire, Bourne, West
 Francis Cook, esquire, Stockton, North
 Norman Anthony Godman, esquire, Greenock and
 Inverclyde
 John Mark Taylor, esquire, Solihull
 Michael Nicholson Lord, esquire, Central Suffolk and
 North Ipswich
 Peter Leslie Pike, esquire, Burnley
 James Robert Wallace, esquire, Orkney and Shetland
 Charles Peter Kennedy, esquire, Ross, Skye and
 Inverness, West
 Robert Nelson Wareing, esquire, Liverpool, West Derby
 Terence Anthony Gordon Davis, esquire, Birmingham,
 Hodge Hill
 Robin Corbett, esquire, Birmingham, Erdington
 Malcolm Gray Bruce, esquire, Gordon
 Ann Clwyd, Cynon Valley
 William O'Brien, esquire, Normanton
 Patrick Allen McLoughlin, esquire, West Derbyshire
 Andrew Robert Frederick Hunter, esquire, Basingstoke
 Robert Victor Jackson, esquire, Wantage
 David Martin Hinchliffe, esquire, Wakefield
 Audrey, Mrs. Wise, Preston
 Alice, Mrs. Mahon, Halifax
 Maria, Mrs. Fyfe, Glasgow, Maryhill
 Simon Henry Ward Hughes, esquire, North Southwark
 and Bermondsey
 Eric Evelyn Illsley, esquire, Barnsley, Central
 Harold Barnes, esquire, North-East Derbyshire
 John Scott Cummings, esquire, Easington
 Ronald Campbell, esquire, Blyth Valley
 Donald Anderson, esquire, Swansea, East
 Gerald Neil Steinberg, esquire, City of Durham
 Timothy Eric Boswell, esquire, Daventry
 Simon Hugh McGuigan Burns, esquire, Chelmsford
 Patrick Charles Martyn Nicholls, esquire, Teignbridge
 James Douglas Cran, esquire, Beverley and Holderness
 Christopher John Fred Gill RD, esquire, Ludlow
 John McAllion, esquire, Dundee, East
 James Hood, esquire, Clydesdale
 Matthew Owen John Taylor, esquire, Truro and
 St. Austell
 Ieuan Wyn Jones, esquire, Ynys Môn
 Bernard Alexander Montgomery Grant, esquire,
 Tottenham
 Alexander Elliot Anderson Salmond, esquire, Banff and
 Buchan
 James Wray, esquire, Glasgow, Baillieston
 David Arthur Stephen Tredinnick, esquire, Bosworth
 Joan Mary, Mrs. Ruddock, Lewisham, Deptford
 Frank Doran, esquire, Aberdeen, Central
 Christopher John Mullin, esquire, Sunderland, South
 Eric Anthony Martlew, esquire, Carlisle

[Madam Speaker]

- James Norwich Arbuthnot, esquire, North-East Hampshire
- Ian Cameron Bruce, esquire, South Dorset
- Janet Ray, Mrs. Michie, Argyll and Bute
- Stephen Richard Day, esquire, Cheadle
- Catherine Letitia Hoey, Vauxhall
- William David Trimble, esquire, Upper Bann
- Right honourable Sir Archibald Gavin Hamilton, Epsom and Ewell
- Paul Phillip Flynn, esquire, Newport, West
- William John Olnier, esquire, Nuneaton
- James Dolan Cunningham, esquire, Coventry, South
- Piara Singh Khabra, esquire, Ealing, Southall
- David George Hanson, esquire, Delyn
- Edward Henry Garnier, esquire, Harborough
- Andrew Peter Miller, esquire, Ellesmere Port and Neston
- Rachel Anne Squire, Dunfermline, West
- Malcolm Douglas Moss, esquire, North-East Cambridgeshire
- Gary Nicholas Streeter, esquire, South-West Devon
- Jean Ann Corston, Bristol, East
- George William Stevenson, esquire, Stoke-on-Trent, South
- William James Clappison, esquire, Hertsmere
- Nicholas Richard Ainger, esquire, Carmarthen, West and South Pembrokeshire
- Oliver Heald, esquire, North-East Hertfordshire
- Adam Paterson Ingram, esquire, East Kilbride
- Martyn David Jones, esquire, Clwyd, South
- Michael Clapham, esquire, Barnsley, West and Penistone
- Jeff Ennis, esquire, Barnsley, East and Mexborough
- Angela Frances, Mrs. Browning, Tiverton and Honiton
- Peter Landreth Atkinson, esquire, Hexham
- Katherine, Mrs. Adams, Paisley, North
- Roger Duncan Godsiff, esquire, Birmingham, Sparkbrook and Small Heath
- Lynne Mary Jones, Birmingham, Selly Oak
- Neil Francis Gerrard, esquire, Walthamstow
- Nigel Keith Anthony Standish Vaz, esquire, Leicester, East
- Margaret Eve, Mrs. Hodge MBE, Barking
- Thomas Pendry, esquire, Stalybridge and Hyde
- John Marek, esquire, Wrexham
- Bruce Joseph Grocott, esquire, Telford
- John Matthew Patrick Hutton, esquire, Barrow and Furness
- Donald Michael Ellison Foster, esquire, Bath
- Helen Margaret, Mrs. Jackson, Sheffield, Hillsborough
- David William George Chidgey, esquire, Eastleigh
- Michael St. John Trend, esquire, Windsor
- James Keith Chapman, esquire, Wirral, South
- Huw William Edmund Edwards, esquire, Monmouth
- William John Gunnell, esquire, Morley and Rothwell
- James Donnelly Touhig, esquire, Islwyn
- Hugh Bayley, esquire, City of York
- George Iain Duncan Smith, esquire, Chingford and Woodford Green
- Nicholas John Hawkins, esquire, Surrey Heath
- Tessa Jane Helen Douglas Jowell, Dulwich and West Norwood
- Joycé Gwendolen Quin, Gateshead, East and Washington, West
- Alan Milburn, esquire, Darlington
- William Etherington, esquire, Sunderland, North
- Gwyneth Patricia, Mrs. Dunwoody, Crewe and Nantwich
- Brian David Henderson Wilson, esquire, Cunninghame, North
- Cheryl Elise Kendall, Mrs. Gillan, Chesham and Amersham
- John Flasby Lawrance Whittingdale, esquire, OBE, Maldon and East Chelmsford
- Geoffrey Robert Clifton Brown, esquire, Cotswold
- Roseanna Cunningham, Perth
- Peter James Bottomley, esquire, Worthing, West
- Gerry Sutcliffe, esquire, Bradford, South
- Richard Haines Burden, esquire, Birmingham, Northfield
- Joan Lorraine Walley, Stoke-on-Trent, North
- Ian Phares Pearson, esquire, Dudley, South
- James Edward Thornton Paice, esquire, South-East Cambridgeshire
- Denis MacShane, esquire, Rotherham
- Michael Connarty, esquire, Falkirk, East
- Richard Spring, esquire, West Suffolk
- John Heppell, esquire, Nottingham, East
- Michael Louis David Fabricant, esquire, Lichfield
- David Digby Rendel, esquire, Newbury
- Jon Hedley Trickett, esquire, Hemsworth
- Simon Patrick Tipping, esquire, Sherwood
- Arthur Nicholas Winston Soames, esquire, Mid Sussex
- Bernard Christison Jenkin, esquire, North Essex
- Dr. Anthony Wayland Wright, Cannock Chase
- Gordon Prentice, esquire, Pendle
- Anne Caroline Ballingall McIntosh, Vale of York
- Christopher James Fraser, esquire, Mid Dorset and North Poole
- Keith Robert Simpson, esquire, Mid Norfolk
- Julian Murray Lewis, esquire, New Forest, East
- Owen William Paterson, esquire, North Shropshire
- Howard Emerson Flight, esquire, Arundel and South Downs
- Barbara Maureen, Mrs. Roche, Hornsey and Wood Green
- Laurence Anthony Robertson, esquire, Tewkesbury
- Right honourable Sir George Samuel Knatchbull Young, North-West Hampshire
- Robert Andrew Raymond Syms, esquire, Poole
- Anthony Colman, esquire, Putney
- Benjamin Peter James Bradshaw, esquire, Exeter

Fraser Kemp, esquire, Houghton and Washington, East
 Ian Arthur Cawsey, esquire, Brigg and Goole
 Rudolf Jan Vis, esquire, Finchley and Golders Green
 Andrew David Lansley, esquire, South Cambridgeshire
 Michael Thomas Hancock, esquire, Portsmouth, South
 Richard Arthur Lloyd Livsey, esquire, Brecon and
 Radnorshire
 Lembit Opik, esquire, Montgomeryshire
 Jennifer Louise Tonge, Richmond Park
 Edward Jonathon Davey, esquire, Kingston and Surbiton
 Paul Kenneth Burstow, esquire, Sutton and Cheam
 Denis Murphy, esquire, Wansbeck
 Julian William Hendy Brazier, esquire, TD, Canterbury
 Paul Archer Tyler, esquire, CBE, North Cornwall
 Malcolm Hunt Wicks, esquire, Croydon, North
 Desmond Stanley Turner, esquire, Brighton, Kemptown
 Peter Michael Ainsworth, esquire, East Surrey
 Christine Margaret Butler, Castle Point
 Helen Mary Jones, Warrington, North
 Jovanka Humble, Blackpool, North and Fleetwood
 Andrew Hartley Dismore, esquire, Hendon
 Anthony James McNulty, esquire, Harrow, East
 James Fitzpatrick, esquire, Poplar and Canning Town
 Llewellyn Thomas Smith, esquire, Blaenau Gwent
 Clare Judith Mallaber, Amber Valley
 Linda Gilroy, Plymouth, Sutton
 Christine Margaret Russell, City of Chester
 Jennifer Grace Jones, Wolverhampton, South-West
 Right honourable John Roddick Russell MacGregor OBE,
 South Norfolk
 Roger Leslie Berry, esquire, Kingswood
 Jeffrey Mark Donaldson, esquire, Lagan Valley

John Martin McDonnell, esquire, Hayes and Harlington
 Gareth Richard Thomas, esquire, Harrow, West
 Mark Wainwright Todd, esquire, South Derbyshire
 Ann Lloyd Keen, Brentford and Isleworth
 Colin Burgon, esquire, Elmet
 David Anthony Lock, esquire, Wyre Forest
 John Cradock Maples, esquire, Stratford-on-Avon
 Eleanor Fulton Laing, Epping Forest
 Andrew Stunell, esquire, Hazel Grove
 Melanie Jane Johnson, Welyn Hatfield
 Phyllis Margaret Starkey, Milton Keynes, South-West
 Jacqueline Jill Smith, Redditch
 Paul Stuart Keetch, esquire, Hereford
 William John Thompson, esquire, West Tyrone
 Thomas Hilton Dawson, esquire, Lancaster and Wyre
 Ann Coffey, Stockport
 Ian Graham Davidson, esquire, Glasgow, Pollok
 Anne Campbell, Cambridge
 Harold Best, esquire, Leeds, North-West
 Anthony Richard Clark, esquire, Northampton, South
 Stephen Creswell Timms, esquire, East Ham
 Donald Cameron Easterbrook Gorrie, esquire,
 Edinburgh, West
 Paul Gerard Goggins, esquire, Wythenshawe and
 Sale, East
 Hazel Anne Blears, Salford
 Stephen Pelham Pound, esquire, Ealing, North

ADJOURNMENT

Resolved, That this House do now adjourn until tomorrow at half-past Nine o'clock.—[*Mr. Betts.*]

Adjourned accordingly at three minutes to Five o'clock.

House of Commons

Friday 9 May 1997

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER in the Chair]

Madam Speaker: I hope that it will be possible this morning for all those Members who wish to do so to take the oath or to affirm without the need for any suspension of our proceedings. I intend to finish not later than noon. Before those elected for the first time last week come forward, I will take Members from earlier Parliaments who are present, and I see that there are quite a few.

Members Sworn

The following Members took and subscribed the Oath, or made and subscribed the Affirmation required by law:

Glenda May Jackson, CBE, Hampstead and Highgate
 Terence Lewis, esquire, Worsley
 Right honourable John Alan Redwood, Wokingham
 Richard Geoffrey James Ottaway, esquire, Croydon, South
 John Quentin Davies, esquire, Grantham and Stamford
 Peter David Robinson, esquire, Belfast, East
 Peter James Luff, esquire, Mid-Worcestershire
 Nigel Martin Evans, esquire, Ribble Valley
 John Rhodes Horam, esquire, Orpington
 Sir Alexander Paul Beresford, Mole Valley
 Derek John Fatchett, esquire, Leeds, Central
 Paul Peter Murphy, esquire, Torfaen
 Ian McCartney, esquire, Makerfield
 David Anthony Atkinson, esquire, Bournemouth, East
 Edward Julian Egerton Leigh, esquire, Gainsborough
 John Dominic Battle, esquire, Leeds, West
 Joseph Alan Meale, esquire, Mansfield
 David Anthony Andrew Amess, esquire, Southend, West
 Ian Stewart, esquire, Eccles
 Lindsay Harvey Hoyle, esquire, Chorley
 Dr. Howard Geoffrey Alvin Stoate, Dartford
 Beverley June Hughes, Stretford and Urmston
 Linda Perham, Ilford, North
 John Healey, esquire, Wentworth
 Ronald Cyril Fearn, esquire, Southport
 Louise Joyce Ellman, Liverpool, Riverside
 Jacqueline Rita, Mrs. Lawrence, Preseli Pembrokeshire
 Philip Hammond, esquire, Runnymede and Weybridge
 Timothy Paul Loughton, esquire, Worthing, East and Shoreham
 Candice Kathleen Atherton, Falmouth and Camborne

Shaun Anthony Woodward, esquire, Witney
 James Andrew Plaskitt, esquire, Warwick and Leamington
 Dr. John Vincent Cable, Twickenham
 Brian Joseph Cotter, esquire, Weston-super-Mare
 Adrian Mark Sanders, esquire, Torbay
 Sydney Norman John Rapson, esquire, Portsmouth, North
 David William St. John Heath, esquire, Somerton and Frome
 Timothy William George Collins, esquire, Westmorland and Lonsdale
 William Ernest Rammell, esquire, Harlow
 Mark Oaten, esquire, Winchester
 Thomas Anthony Brake, esquire, Carshalton and Wallington
 Fiona Margaret Mactaggart, Slough
 Ivor Keith Caplin, esquire, Hove
 Christopher Richard Pond, esquire, Gravesham
 Gillian Joanna Merron, Lincoln
 Kelvin Peter Hopkins, esquire, Luton, North
 Theresa Mary, Mrs. May, Maidenhead
 Graham Brady, esquire, Altrincham and Sale, West
 Martin Philip Caton, esquire, Gower
 John Simon Bercow, esquire, Buckingham
 Stuart Bell, esquire, Middlesbrough
 Right honourable Derek Foster, Bishop Auckland
 Nicholas John Gibb, esquire, Bognor Regis and Littlehampton
 Christopher Nigel Beard, esquire, Bexleyheath and Crayford
 Stephen John Ladyman, esquire, South Thanet
 Stephen Hepburn, esquire, Jarrow
 Nicholas Francis St. Aubyn, esquire, Guildford
 Alan Patrick Vincent Whitehead, esquire, Southampton, Test
 Daphne Barbara Follett, Stevenage
 Gisela Gschaider, Mrs. Stuart, Birmingham, Edgbaston
 Brian David Jenkins, esquire, Tamworth
 Patricia Hope Hewitt, Leicester, West
 Jonathan Sayeed, esquire, Mid-Bedfordshire
 Brian Arthur Robert White, esquire, Milton Keynes, North-East
 Nicholas Douglas Palmer, esquire, Broxtowe
 Ivan John Henderson, esquire, Harwich
 Paul Gordon Clark, esquire, Gillingham
 Lawrence William Quinn, esquire, Scarborough and Whitby
 Alan Arthur Johnson, esquire, Kingston upon Hull, West and Hessle
 Hywel Rhodri Morgan, esquire, Cardiff, West
 Julie Morgan, Cardiff, North
 Paul David Stinchcombe, esquire, Wellingborough
 Steven John Byers, esquire, Tyneside, North

Charles Rodway Clarke, esquire, Norwich, South
 Claire Margaret Ward, Watford
 Debra Ann Shipley, Stourbridge
 Michael David Wills, esquire, North Swindon
 Gwynfor Mathews Prosser, esquire, Dover
 Charlotte Atkins, Staffordshire, Moorlands

10.10 am

Sitting suspended.

10.45 am

On resuming—

Eric Jack Pickles, esquire, Brentwood and Ongar
 Barry Strachan Gardiner, esquire, Brent, North
 Iain Coleman, esquire, Hammersmith and Fulham
 Right honourable Alan Kenneth McKenzie Clark,
 Kensington and Chelsea
 Margaret Moran, Luton, South
 Oona Tamsyn King, Bethnal Green and Bow
 Caroline Louise Flint, Don Valley
 Andrew Guy Tyrie, esquire, Chichester
 Philip James Woolas, esquire, Oldham, East and
 Saddleworth
 Stephen Twigg, esquire, Enfield, Southgate
 Dominic Charles Roberts Grieve, esquire, Beaconsfield
 David Roy Lidington, esquire, Aylesbury
 David Anthony Crausby, esquire, Bolton, North-East
 Philip Andrew Sawford, esquire, Kettering
 Eileen, Mrs. Gordon, Romford
 Andrew Love, esquire, Edmonton
 Geraint Richard Davies, esquire, Croydon, Central
 Robert Graham Marshall-Andrews, esquire, Medway

David Lepper, esquire, Brighton, Pavilion
 Dr. John Reid, Hamilton, North and Bellshill

11 am

Sitting suspended.

11.45 am

On resuming—

Right honourable Sir Peter Norman Fowler, Sutton
 Coldfield
 John Martin Linton, esquire, Battersea
 Paul William Barry Marsden, esquire, Shrewsbury and
 Atcham
 David Laurie Ruffley, esquire, Bury St. Edmunds
 Piers Rolf Garfield Merchant, esquire, Beckenham
 Right honourable Andrew David Smith, esquire,
 Oxford, East
 Anthony Joseph Lloyd, esquire, Manchester, Central
 Judith Ann Church, Dagenham
 John Eric Austin, esquire, Erith and Thamesmead
 Norman John Baker, esquire, Lewes
 Desmond Angus Swayne, esquire, New Forest, West
 Trevor Keith Hill, esquire, Streatham
 Fiona Elizabeth Ann Jones, Newark
 Alun Edward Michael, esquire, Cardiff, South and
 Penarth
 Joan Marie Ryan, Enfield, North

ADJOURNMENT

*Resolved, That this House do now adjourn till
 Tuesday 13 May at half-past Two o'clock.—
 [Mrs. Bridget Prentice.]*

Adjourned accordingly at Twelve noon.

House of Commons

Tuesday 13 May 1997

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Madam Speaker: It may be for the convenience of the House if I indicate that this afternoon I shall call upon all hon. Members in the Chamber to take the Oath or to affirm in order of seniority, but beginning with the hon. Member for Aberdeen, South (Ms Begg). If necessary, I shall suspend the sitting for a period or periods to enable all Members who wish to do so to be called today.

Tomorrow, after the State Opening of Parliament, I shall resume the Chair at 2.15 pm and hope to complete the swearing in of Members before the business of the House begins, but I hope that all Members will be present today and will be sworn in today so that it will be unnecessary, when we have our important day tomorrow, to return to swearing in.

Members Sworn

The following Members took and subscribed the Oath, or made and subscribed the Affirmation required by law:

Anne Begg, Aberdeen, South

Right honourable John Morris, QC, Aberavon

David Gordon Clelland, esquire, Tyne Bridge

Right honourable Michael Ray Dibden Heseltine, Henley

Joseph Kevin McNamara, esquire, Kingston upon Hull, North

Jeffrey William Rooker, esquire, Birmingham, Perry Barr

Joseph William Ashton, esquire, Bassetlaw

Allan Ralph Rogers, esquire, Rhondda

George Edward Howarth, esquire, Knowsley, North and Sefton, East

Peter Benjamin Mandelson, esquire, Hartlepool

Right honourable Sir Nicholas Walter Lyell, QC, North-East Bedfordshire

Right honourable David John Denzil Davies, Llanelli

Angela Eagle, Wallasey

Edward Rowlands, esquire, Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney

Michael John Mates, esquire, East Hampshire

Anthony David Steen, esquire, Totnes

Dr. Michael Clark, Rayleigh

Jeremy Bernard Corbyn, esquire, Islington, North

Menzies Campbell, esquire, CBE, QC, North-East Fife

Dr. Lewis George Moonie, Kirkcaldy

Diane Julie Abbott, Hackney, North and Stoke Newington

David Charles Jamieson, esquire, Plymouth, Devonport

Helen Lawrie, Mrs. Liddell, Airdrie and Shotts

Hilary Jane Armstrong, North-West Durham

Ian Colin Taylor, esquire, MBE, Esher and Walton

David Wilshire, esquire, Spelthorne

Edward O'Hara, esquire, Knowsley, South

Brian Harold Donohoe, esquire, Cunninghame, South

Janet, Mrs. Anderson, Rossendale and Darwen

Robert John Blizzard, esquire, Waveney

Andrew Stuart Mackinlay, esquire, Thurrock

Kevin John Barron, esquire, Rother Valley

Llinos, Mrs. Golding, Newcastle-under-Lyme

Tony McWalter, esquire, Hemel Hempstead

Terence Henry Rooney, esquire, Bradford, North

Christine McCafferty, Calder Valley

Mohammad Sarwar, esquire, Glasgow, Govan

Robert Laxton, esquire, Derby, North

Seamus Mallon, esquire, Newry and Armagh

Edward Kevin McGrady, esquire, South Down

Dr. Alan Wynne Williams, Carmarthen, East and Dinefwr

Nigel Christopher Waterson, esquire, Eastbourne

Andrew John Bernard Rowe, esquire, Faversham and Mid-Kent

John Ernest Townend, esquire, East Yorkshire

Paul Anthony Truswell, esquire, Pudsey

John Timothy Grogan, esquire, Selby

Dr. Liam Fox, Woodspring

Christopher Michael Leslie, esquire, Shipley

Timothy Stephen Kenneth Yeo, esquire, South Suffolk

David James Christian Faber, esquire, Westbury

William Nigel Paul Cash, esquire, Stone

Fabian Hamilton, esquire, Leeds, North-East

Kenneth Robert Livingstone, esquire, Brent, East

Marsha Singh, esquire, Bradford, West

Colin Pickthall, esquire, West Lancashire

Richard Beecroft Allan, esquire, Sheffield, Hallam

Kerry Patrick Pollard, esquire, St. Albans

Caroline Alice, Mrs. Spelman, Meriden

James Gerald Douglas Howarth, esquire, Aldershot

Humfrey Jonathon Malins, esquire, Woking

John Robert Cryer, esquire, Hornchurch

Michael Cathel Fallon, esquire, Sevenoaks

Michael Roy Wood, esquire, Batley and Spen

James Charles Cann, esquire, Ipswich

George Philip Willis, esquire, Harrogate and Knaresborough

Gerald Edward Bermingham, esquire, St. Helens, South

Colin Edward Breed, esquire, South-East Cornwall

Damian Howard Green, esquire, Ashford

James Whiteside Gray, esquire, North Wiltshire

Wyvill Richard Nicholls Raynsford, esquire, Greenwich and Woolwich

Anthony Brian Baldry, esquire, Banbury

Dr. Evan Harris, Oxford, West and Abingdon

Claire Curtis-Tansley, Crosby

George Turner, esquire, North-West Norfolk

Cynog Glyndwr Dafis, esquire, Ceredigion

- Right honourable Michael Hugh Meacher, Oldham, West and Royton
 Christopher Shaun Ruane, esquire, Vale of Clwyd
 Alan Campbell, esquire, Tynemouth
 John Patrick Aubone Burnett, esquire, Torridge and West Devon
 Steven John Webb, esquire, Northavon
 Ashok Kumar, esquire, Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland, East
 Maria Eagle, Liverpool, Garston
 Rosalie Winterton, Doncaster, Central
 Kali Carol Jean Mountford, Colne Valley
 Brian Iddon, esquire, Bolton, South-East
 Gareth Thomas, esquire, Clwyd, West
 Ivan Lewis, esquire, Bury, South
 Gordon Marsden, esquire, Blackpool, South
 Alan Keen, esquire, Feltham and Heston
 David Neil Kidney, esquire, Stafford
 Dr. Ian Gibson, Norwich, North
 Geraldine Smith, Morecambe and Lunesdale
 Michael Kevin Moore, esquire, Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale
 Jacqueline Margaret, Mrs. Ballard, Taunton
 Sir Robert Hill Smith, baronet, West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine
 Teresa Jane Kingham, Gloucester
 Diana Mary Organ, Forest of Dean
 Anthony David Wright, esquire, Great Yarmouth
 Angela Evans Smith, Basildon
 Clive Stanley Efford, esquire, Eltham
 David Elliott Drew, esquire, Stroud
 Roger Mark Casale, esquire, Wimbledon
 Helen Rosemary Brinton, Peterborough
 Andrew King, esquire, Rugby and Kenilworth
 Betty Helena, Mrs. Williams, Conwy
 Henry Baird McLeish, esquire, Central Fife
 Constance Ann, Mrs. Cryer, Keighley
 Dawn Primarolo, Bristol, South
 Stephen Hesford, esquire, Wirral, West
 Michael Jabez Foster, esquire, Hastings and Rye
 Michael John Foster, esquire, Worcester
 Janet Elizabeth Ann Dean, Burton
 Michael Thomas Hall, esquire, Weaver Vale
 Geoffrey Robinson, esquire, Coventry, North-West
 Karen Patricia Buck, Regent's Park and Kensington, North
 Peter Charles Stephen Bradley, esquire, The Wrekin
 Stephen James McCabe, esquire, Birmingham, Hall Green
 James Dobbin, esquire, Heywood and Middleton
 Graham Eric Stringer, esquire, Manchester, Blackley
 Keith Ernest Darvill, esquire, Upminster
 Patrick Hall, esquire, Bedford
 Derek Murray Wyatt, esquire, Sittingbourne and Sheppey
 Alan Arthur Hurst, esquire, Braintree
 Andrew Henry George, esquire, St. Ives
 John Ramsay Swinney, esquire, North Tayside
 Alastair Neil Morgan, esquire, Galloway and Upper Nithsdale
 Barry John Sheerman, esquire, Huddersfield
 Mark Fisher, esquire, Stoke-on-Trent, Central
 Eric Lionel Clarke, esquire, Midlothian
 John Henry Hayes, esquire, South Holland and The Deepings
 David Leslie Taylor, esquire, North-West Leicestershire
 Andrew John Reed, esquire, Loughborough
 Dari Jean Taylor, Stockton, South
 Philip Ian Hope, esquire, Corby
 David Leonard Watts, esquire, St. Helens, North
 Joseph Edward Benton, esquire, Bootle
 Helen Mary Southworth, Warrington, South
 Martin Bell, esquire, Tatton
 Nigel David Jones, esquire, Cheltenham
 Oliver Letwin, esquire, West Dorset
 Peter Temple-Morris, esquire, Leominster
 Elizabeth Marion Blackman, Erewash
 Laura Jean, Mrs. Moffatt, Crawley
 John Yorke Denham, esquire, Southampton, Itchen
 Julia Kate Drown, South Swindon
 Yvette Cooper, Pontefract and Castleford
 John William Patrick Smith, esquire, Vale of Glamorgan
 Michael John Gapes, esquire, Ilford, South
 David Gifford Leathes Prior, esquire, commonly called the honourable David Gifford Leathes Prior, North Norfolk
 Nigel Griffiths, esquire, Edinburgh, South
 Jonathan Rowland Shaw, esquire, Chatham and Aylesford
 Vernon Rodney Coaker, esquire, Gedling
 James Murphy, esquire, Eastwood
 David John Stewart, esquire, Inverness, East, Nairn and Lochaber
 Sandra Currie Osborne, Ayr
 Harry Michael Cohen, esquire, Leyton and Wanstead
 Russell Leslie Brown, esquire, Dumfries
 Malcolm Kemp Savidge, esquire, Aberdeen, North
 Dr. Peter Brand, Isle of Wight
 Robert Edward Russell, esquire, Colchester
 Peter Charles Snape, esquire, West Bromwich, East
 Crispin Jeremy Rupert Blunt, esquire, Reigate
 Elfyn Llwyd, esquire, Meirionnydd Nant Conwy
 Tom Levitt, esquire, High Peak
 Desmond Browne, esquire, Kilmarnock and Loudoun
 Lynda Margaret Clark, QC, Edinburgh, Pentlands
 Rosemary McKenna, Cumbernauld and Kilsyth
 Andrew Robert George Robathan, esquire, Blaby
 Right honourable David Philip Heathcoat-Amory, Wells
 Archibald John Norman, esquire, Tunbridge Wells
 David Stanley Borrow, esquire, South Ribble

Robert John Walter, esquire, North Dorset
 Sally Curtis Keeble, Northampton, North
 George Galloway, esquire, Glasgow, Kelvin
 Jane Patricia Griffiths, Reading, East
 Martin John Salter, esquire, Reading, West
 Julie Kirkbride, Bromsgrove
 Valerie Davey, Bristol, West
 John Derek Twigg, esquire, Halton
 Dennis Turner, esquire, Wolverhampton, South-East
 Kenneth Purchase, esquire, Wolverhampton, North-East
 Bowen Wells, esquire, Hertford and Stortford
 Anthony Louis Banks, esquire, West Ham
 Siobhain Ann McDonagh, Mitcham and Morden
 Right honourable Virginia Hilda Brunette Maxwell,
 Mrs. Bottomley, South-West Surrey
 George Edward Mudie, esquire, Leeds, East
 Alan James Carter Duncan, esquire, Rutland and Melton
 Christopher Robert Chope, esquire, Christchurch

4.3 pm

Sitting suspended.

4.30 pm

On resuming—Richard George Caborn, esquire,
 Sheffield, Central
 Peter John Viggers, esquire, Gosport
 David Lindsay Willetts, esquire, Havant
 Shona McIsaac, Cleethorpes
 Ruth Maria Kelly, Bolton, West
 Frank Roy, esquire, Motherwell and Wishaw
 Ross Frederick Cranston, esquire, Dudley, North
 David Michael Chaytor, esquire, Bury, North
 Anne, Mrs. McGuire, Stirling

ADJOURNMENT

Resolved, That this House do now adjourn till
 tomorrow at twenty-five minutes past Eleven o'clock.—
 [Mr. Mudie.]

*Adjourned accordingly at twenty-four minutes to Five
 o'clock.*

House of Commons

Wednesday 14 May 1997

*The House met at twenty-five minutes past
Eleven o'clock*

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER in the Chair]

Message to attend Her Majesty:

The House went; and having returned:

*The sitting was suspended until fifteen minutes past
Two o'clock, and then resumed.*

Members Sworn

*The following Members took and subscribed the Oath,
or made and subscribed the Affirmation required by Law:*

John Robert Greenway, esquire, Ryedale

Tam Dalyell, esquire, Linlithgow

Kenneth Maginnis, esquire, Fermanagh and South Tyrone

Robert Law McCartney, esquire, QC, North Down

Nicholas Barton Harvey, esquire, North Devon

Douglas John Henderson, esquire, Newcastle upon Tyne,
North

Calum Alasdair Macdonald, esquire, Western Isles

James Mackay Cousins, esquire, Newcastle upon Tyne,
Central

Austin Vernon Mitchell, esquire, Great Grimsby

Alan John Simpson, esquire, Nottingham, South

Sylvia Lloyd, Mrs. Heal, Halesowen and Rowley Regis

Michael O'Brien, esquire, North Warwickshire

Lorna Fitzsimons, Rochdale

Dr. John Douglas Naysmith, Bristol, North-West

Dan Norris, esquire, Wansdyke

2.22 pm

Sitting suspended.

2.30 pm

On resuming—

SESSIONAL ORDERS

ELECTIONS

Ordered,

That all Members who are returned for two or more places in any part of the United Kingdom do make their Election for which of the places they will serve, within one week after it shall appear that there is no question upon the Return for that place; and if anything shall come in question touching the Return or Election of any Member, he is to withdraw during the time the matter is in debate; and that all Members returned upon double Returns do withdraw till their Returns are determined.

Resolved,

That no Peer of the Realm, except a Peer of Ireland, hath any right to give his vote in the Election of any Member to serve in Parliament.

Resolved,

That if it shall appear that any person hath been elected or returned a Member of this House, or endeavoured so to be, by Bribery or any other corrupt practices, this House will proceed with the utmost severity against all such persons as shall have been wilfully concerned in such Bribery or other corrupt practices.

Witnesses

Resolved,

That if it shall appear that any person hath been tampering with any Witness, in respect of his evidence to be given to this House, or any Committee thereof, or directly or indirectly hath endeavoured to deter or hinder any person from appearing or giving evidence the same is declared to be a high crime and misdemeanour; and this House will proceed with the utmost severity against such offender.

Resolved,

That if it shall appear that any person hath given false evidence in any case before this House, or any Committee thereof, this House will proceed with the utmost severity against such offender.

Metropolitan Police

Ordered,

That the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis do take care that during the Session of Parliament the passages through the streets leading to the House be kept free and open and that no obstruction be permitted to hinder the passage of Members to and from this House, and that no disorder be allowed in Westminster Hall, or in the passages leading to this House, during the Sitting of Parliament, and that there be no annoyance therein or thereabouts; and that the Serjeant at Arms attending this House do communicate this Order to the Commissioner aforesaid.

VOTES AND PROCEEDINGS

Ordered,

That the Votes and Proceedings of this House be printed, being first perused by Madam Speaker; and that she do appoint the printing thereof; and that no person but such as she shall appoint do presume to print the same.

OUTLAWRIES

Bill for the more effectual preventing Clandestine Outlawries;
read the First time; to be read a Second time.

JOURNAL

Ordered,

That the Journal of this House, from the end of the last Session to the end of the present Session, with an index thereto, be printed.

Ordered,

That the said Journal and Index be printed by the appointment and under the direction of Donald William Limon, Esq. CB, the Clerk of this House.

Ordered,

That the said Journal and Index be printed by such person as shall be licensed by Madam Speaker, and that no other person do presume to print the same.

Madam Speaker's Statement

Madam Speaker: I wish to make a statement about the availability of services in the House for those who do not take their seats after being returned here as Members.

This House has traditionally accommodated great extremes of opinion. I am sure therefore that the House would not wish to put any unnecessary obstacle in the way of Members wishing to fulfil their democratic mandate by attending, speaking and voting in this House. Equally, I feel certain that those who choose not to take their seats should not have access to the many benefits and facilities that are now available in the House without also taking up their responsibilities as Members.

The present position is that, under the terms of the Parliamentary Oaths Act 1866, any Member who fails to take the oath or to make the affirmation that is required by law and who then votes or sits during any debate after the election of the Speaker is subject to a penalty of £500 on each occasion and his or her seat is automatically vacated. In 1924, one of my predecessors ruled that any such Member could not receive a salary, and this regulation also applies to allowances.

In the interests of the House, and making use of the power vested in the office of the Speaker to control the accommodation and services in the Commons parts of the Palace of Westminster and the precincts, I have decided to extend these restrictions. As from the date of the end of the debate on the Queen's Speech, the services that are available to all other Members from the six Departments of the House and beyond will not be open for use by Members who have not taken their seats by swearing or by affirmation.

For the avoidance of doubt, a schedule listing these various services will be appended to this statement in the *Official Report*. One of the purposes of this will, of course, be to enable officers and servants of the House and others to administer these new regulations with clarity and precision.

Of course, I accept that there may be occasional cases where an elected Member, for reasons of health or for other good reasons, cannot attend to take his or her seat immediately after election, but, nevertheless, desires to do so at the earliest possible moment. Provided such a Member sends me a letter informing me of his or her

inability to attend and signifying his or her intention to attend to swear or affirm at the earliest possible time, I will give instructions that these new regulations should not be applied. This should be done not later than the date of the end of the debate on the Queen's Speech or, in the case of a by-election, after 10 sitting days.

The House will have noted that the date which I have set for the introduction of these regulations is the end of the debate on the Queen's Speech. That is not an ideal date, but the House needs notice of these changes. In a future Parliament, the effective date both for the cessation of services and for the deadline for the sending of the letter requesting excusal will be the date of the Queen's Speech itself.

The services to which the new regulations apply include:

- Legal services
- Procedural services, including the tabling of questions, motions and amendments, and public petitions
- Broadcasting services
- Vote Office services
- Services available from the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology
- The provision of passes, special permits and car parking facilities
- Access to those areas within the parliamentary precincts which are open only to pass holders
- The booking of Committee Rooms, conference rooms and interview rooms
- Office accommodation services for Members and their staff
- Computer services, except those available to the public
- The allocation of Gallery tickets
- The sponsoring of exhibitions in the Upper Waiting Hall
- Members' medical services
- Library and research services, except for those services of the Public Information Office generally available to the public
- Services provided by the Official Report
- Payroll and other financial services provided to Members and their staff
- Insurance services
- Catering services provided for Members and their staff, including the sponsoring of banqueting services
- Police and security advice available within the precincts
- Services in the Members' post offices
- Travel services

Points of Order

2.38 pm

Mr. Alan Clark (Kensington and Chelsea): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. To what extent have you assented to, or been consulted about, the edict, issuing apparently from the Prime Minister's office, that curtails the length, content, duration and timing of Prime Minister's Question Time? Already, the Table Office is refusing to take questions except for once a week on Wednesdays. Surely this matter should be debated in the Chamber. It jeopardises the rights of Back Benchers on both sides of the Chamber and affects the accountability of the Executive to the electorate as a whole. Furthermore, it is exactly the kind of encroachment on the rights of Members by Governments to which we look to you for protection.

Sir Peter Emery (East Devon): Further to that point of order, Madam Speaker. I gave you notice that I would ask you to defend and protect Back-Bench Members because it was announced not to the House but by way of a press statement from Downing street that hon. Members were to be deprived of putting questions to the Prime Minister twice a week, a right which has existed for 35 years, and that a once-a-week system was to be introduced. You will know that the Procedure Committee made a number of recommendations to the House which were not debated. One of them concerned the possibility of having Prime Minister's Question Time only once a week. It was unanimously decided by members of the Labour party and members of the Conservative party that that was not tenable if we were to defend Back-Bench Members.

I must appeal to you, Madam Speaker, to use your massive influence beyond the Chair to ensure that the alteration is not made until the matter has been reconsidered by the Procedure Committee or there has been a full debate on the Floor of the House, with a motion that is amendable, to protect the rights of Back Benchers.

Mr. David Trimble (Upper Bann): Further to that point of order, Madam Speaker. May I draw your attention to what appear to be the consequential effects of this sudden decision? The time available for Northern Ireland questions will be reduced by a quarter, that for Welsh questions will be reduced accordingly, and that for Scottish questions will be reduced by one third. As a consequence, the opportunity for Members representing Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to raise issues in the House will be substantially curtailed. That has been done without any consultation with the persons representing those regions. Would it not be better to ensure that there is consultation and debate and that the rights of Back Benchers in the House are not curtailed in such an arbitrary manner?

Mrs. Sylvia Heal (Halesowen and Rowley Regis): Further to the point of order, Madam Speaker. As a former Member of Parliament and now a new Member, delighted to be returned as Member for the constituency of Halesowen and Rowley Regis, may I say that the part of the business of the House that is perhaps most widely known in this country and overseas is the twice-weekly spectacle of Prime Minister's Question Time. I have both observed and participated in it, and I do not think that

it has always brought Members of the House any great credibility. One of its main functions is to make the Prime Minister accountable to Members. I therefore welcome the proposed changes as innovative and something which can only increase the esteem in which this honourable House is held and, more important, make the Prime Minister accountable to its Members.

Mrs. Margaret Ewing (Moray): Further to that point of order, Madam Speaker. The hon. Member for Halesowen and Rowley Regis (Mrs. Heal) has spoken about democratic processes. You will appreciate that many of us are angered at the lack of consultation about the changes that have been made in the tabling of questions. The idea that one phone call from a civil servant should advise people of changes made, without debate on the Floor of the House, which will perhaps improve or lessen the impact of Back Benchers seems wrong. It certainly demeans the rights of people from Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. I ask you, as the protector of Back Benchers, to ensure that the matter is debated on the Floor of the House.

Mr. Joseph Ashton (Bassetlaw): Further to that point of order, Madam Speaker. With regard to your statement about Members taking their seats, may I draw your attention to "Erskine May", page 124—

Madam Speaker: Order. Could I deal with one subject at a time? Allow me to come back, if I may. I think that some Members want to make further points about Prime Minister's Question Time.

Mr. Elfyn Llwyd (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy): Further to the point of order, Madam Speaker. I spoke to the Leader of the House yesterday and she confirmed that the only consultation in Wales had been with the Secretary of State for Wales. I do not think that that is good enough, because other parties from Wales are represented in the House.

Mr. D. N. Campbell-Savours (Workington): Further to that point of order, Madam Speaker. Will you confirm that, under the revised procedure for Prime Minister's questions, more questions to the Prime Minister will now be called in one week than in any other week in the past 30-odd years?

Madam Speaker: That is quite true.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Speaker: I cannot go on taking points of order, but I shall take a few more.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): Further to that point of order, Madam Speaker. Do you accept that what is at issue here is not what has been decided but the manner in which it has been decided? If the House and its procedures are to be ridden over roughshod in that manner, it bodes badly for this Parliament.

Mr. John Home Robertson (East Lothian): Further to that point of order, Madam Speaker. Am I not right in thinking that 30 minutes of questions to the

[Mr. John Home Robertson]

Prime Minister is still 30 minutes, whether it consists of 30 solid minutes or twice 15 minutes, and that the points of order are therefore entirely bogus?

Mr. Patrick Nicholls (Teignbridge): Further to that point of order, Madam Speaker. Is not the ability to ask an open question to the Prime Minister one of the most important rights that Back Benchers have, irrespective of the length of time available for such questions? Bearing in mind the fact that such matters may have to be referred to a Select Committee, on which we can be certain that the Labour party will have a majority, will you take the opportunity to say something about your historic role in protecting the rights of Back Benchers, and also something about how important an open question is?

Madam Speaker: Let me give a response to the concerns that, understandably and genuinely, have been raised. With respect to changes in the days and times available for questioning Ministers, the responsibility for the rota of questions lies with Ministers. The rota is not governed by any Standing Order. It is not therefore a matter with which I as Speaker can interfere. My consent was therefore neither sought nor given. [Interruption.] Order. That is all that I can usefully say at this moment.

If right hon. and hon. Members wish to pursue the matter further, they can address their concerns to the Leader of the House or to whatever Committee is appointed to review such matters. I have taken due note of the concerns raised on the Floor of the House this afternoon.

I believe that the hon. Member for Bassetlaw (Mr. Ashton) has a separate point of order. Is that right?

Mr. Ashton: Yes, Madam Speaker. Would it not be helpful if you were to write to Members who have not taken their seats, pointing out the Standing Orders of the House as they relate to "indignities offered to either House"?

Those are explained on pages 124 and 125 of "Erskine May", as follows:

"Other acts besides words spoken or writings published reflecting upon either House or its proceedings which, though they do not tend directly to obstruct or impede either House in the performance of

its functions, yet have a tendency to produce this result indirectly by bringing such House into odium, contempt or ridicule or by lowering its authority may constitute contempts."

Perhaps you could warn those people that it is possible for the House to refer such matters to the Committee on Standards and Privileges, and for them to be expelled. All sorts of sanctions can be used. Would it not be helpful if that passage were sent to those people?

Mr. David Wilshire (Spelthorne): Further to that point of order, Madam Speaker. As you know, I wrote to you yesterday about the issues covered by your statement. As you also know, I have personal reasons to be especially concerned about bombers and assassins. If people have unsupervised access to the Palace they can bring in guns and explosives, so will you confirm that your ruling means that Sinn Féin-IRA Members of Parliament will not have access to parliamentary passes that would enable their terrorist friends to bring guns into the building?

Madam Speaker: I think that when the hon. Gentleman and the rest of the House have had time to examine my statement, they will see that it is very clear indeed. I shall consider the point made by the hon. Member for Bassetlaw as soon as possible.

Mr. Andrew Rowe (Faversham and Mid-Kent): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. You properly drew our attention to misdemeanours to which Members of Parliament are subject. If it turns out that some members of the public have offered inducements to Members of Parliament, will it be a matter for you as Speaker of this honourable House, or for the police, to ensure that those people are brought to justice?

Madam Speaker: I invite the hon. Gentleman to write to me in full. Obviously he has something in mind that is not now clear to me. Perhaps he will write to me about it.

CHAIRMAN AND DEPUTY CHAIRMEN OF WAYS AND MEANS

Ordered.

That Sir Alan Haselhurst be Chairman of Ways and Means, that Mr. Michael Martin be First Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means, and that Mr. Michael Lord be Second Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means.—[Mrs. Ann Taylor.]

Queen's Speech

Madam Speaker: I have to acquaint the House that this House has this day attended Her Majesty in the House of Peers, and that Her Majesty was pleased to make a Most Gracious Speech from the Throne to both Houses of Parliament, of which I have, for greater accuracy, obtained a copy.

I shall direct that the terms of the Gracious Speech be printed in the Votes and Proceedings. Copies are available in the Vote Office.

The Gracious Speech was as follows:

My Lords and Members of the House of Commons

The Duke of Edinburgh and I look forward to receiving State Visits by His Excellency the President of Brazil in December and by Their Majesties the Emperor and Empress of Japan next year. We also look forward to our visit to Canada and to our State Visits to Pakistan and India.

My Government intend to govern for the benefit of the whole nation.

The education of young people will be my Government's first priority. They will work to raise standards in schools, colleges and universities and to promote lifelong learning at the workplace. They will cut class sizes using money saved as a result of legislation phasing out the assisted places scheme. A further Bill will contain measures to raise educational standards, develop a new role for local education authorities and parents, establish a new framework for the decentralised and equitable organisation of schools, propose reforms to the teaching profession, and respond positively to recommendations from the National Committee of Inquiry into the future of higher education.

The central economic objectives of my Government are high and stable levels of economic growth and employment, to be achieved by ensuring opportunity for all. The essential platform for achieving these objectives is economic stability.

To that end a Bill will be introduced to give the Bank of England operational responsibility for setting interest rates, in order to deliver price stability and support the Government's overall economic policy, within a framework of enhanced accountability. My Government will also ensure that public borrowing is controlled through tough fiscal rules and that the burden of public debt is kept at a stable and prudent level. They will aim to deliver high and sustainable levels of growth and employment by encouraging investment in industry, skills, infrastructure and new technologies; by reducing long-term unemployment, especially among young people; by promoting competition; and by helping to create successful and profitable business. These policies will enhance Britain's position as a leading industrial nation.

My Government have pledged to mount a fundamental attack upon youth and long-term unemployment and will take early steps to implement a welfare-to-work programme to tackle unemployment, financed by a levy on the excess profits of the privatised utilities which will be brought forward in an early Budget. A new partnership with business will be at the heart of my Government's plans to build a modern and dynamic economy to improve the competitiveness of British industry. They will bring forward legislation to reform and strengthen competition

law and introduce a statutory right to interest on late payment of debts. My Government are committed to fairness at work and will introduce a national minimum wage.

Legislation will be brought forward to amend criminal law and to combat crime, including reform of the youth justice system and measures against anti-social behaviour. A Bill will be introduced to prohibit the private possession of handguns.

My Government will improve the National Health Service, as a service providing care on the basis of need to the whole population. They will bring forward new arrangements for decentralisation and cooperation within the service and for ending the internal market. Legislation will be introduced to clarify the existing powers of NHS Trusts to enter into partnerships with the private sector. A White Paper will be published on measures to reduce tobacco consumption, including legislation to ban tobacco advertising.

My Government will contribute to the achievement of high standards of food safety and protection of public health throughout the food chain, will ensure openness and transparency of information to consumers, and will consult widely on recommendations for a Food Standards Agency.

A Bill will be introduced to ensure that as many people as possible have access to the benefits of the National Lottery including for health and education projects.

Measures will be introduced to enable capital receipts from the sale of council houses to be invested in housebuilding and renovation as part of my Government's determination to deal with homelessness and unemployment.

My Government are committed to open and transparent government. They will introduce a Bill to strengthen data protection controls. They will enhance people's aspirations for better, more accessible and accountable public services, using Information Technology to the full. A White Paper will be published on proposals for a Freedom of Information Bill.

A Bill will be introduced to incorporate into United Kingdom law the main provisions of the European Convention on Human Rights.

Decentralisation is essential to my Government's vision of a modern nation. Legislation will be introduced to allow the people of Scotland and Wales to vote in referendums on my Government's proposals for a devolved Scottish Parliament and the establishment of a Welsh Assembly. If these proposals are approved in the referendums, my Government will bring forward legislation to implement them.

Legislation will be introduced to provide for a referendum on a directly elected strategic authority and a directly elected mayor for London. A Bill will be brought forward to establish Regional Development Agencies in England outside London.

In Northern Ireland my Government will seek reconciliation and a political settlement which has broad support, working in cooperation with the Irish Government. They will work to build trust and confidence in Northern Ireland by bringing forward legislation to deal with terrorism and to reduce tension over parades, and other measures to protect human rights, combat discrimination in the workplace, increase confidence in policing and foster economic development.

[Madam Speaker]

Members of the House of Commons

Estimates for the public service will be laid before you.

My Lords and Members of the House of Commons

In the European Union, my Government will take a leading role. They will seek to promote employment, improve competitiveness, complete the Single Market and opt into the Social Chapter. They will seek further reform of the Common Agricultural Policy to secure lower food prices for consumers and save money, support the rural economy and enhance the environment. They will seek changes to the Common Fisheries Policy to conserve fish stocks in the long-term interest of the UK fishing industry. They will play a full part in the debate about Economic and Monetary Union.

My Government will work for the early and successful enlargement of the European Union. They will pursue an outcome to the Intergovernmental Conference and use their Presidency in the first half of 1998 to strengthen European co-operation while advancing the United Kingdom's interests and to make the Union more open, democratic and efficient. A Bill will be introduced to amend the European Communities Act if necessary.

My Government will ensure a strong defence based on the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, and promote international peace and security. They will play a major role in decisions to shape NATO's future, including enlargement, and to include Russia in a wider security framework. To ensure that the United Kingdom's defence capabilities are matched to the changing strategic setting, my Government will reassess our essential security interests and defence needs.

My Government will retain strong armed forces, including the nuclear deterrent. Preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction will be a priority.

My Government will work for reforms to make the United Nations more effective and for an early resolution of its funding crisis.

My Government will continue to support peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina. They will work for a settlement in Cyprus. They will promote efforts for a durable peace in the Middle East.

My Government will work on behalf of Hong Kong's people to achieve a successful transition which preserves their way of life and promotes their continued stability and prosperity.

Preparations will continue for the G7 Summit to be held in Birmingham and the second Asia-Europe Meeting in London in 1998. My Government will host the meeting of the Commonwealth Heads of Government in October 1997 and seize the opportunity to increase co-operation between the United Kingdom and other members of the Commonwealth.

My Government have established a Department for International Development. They will publish a White Paper setting out how, through more coherent policies, they will tackle global poverty and promote sustainable development. They will rejoin the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation.

My Government will promote open markets around the world, while ensuring that the interests of developing countries and the global environment are fairly reflected.

The promotion of human rights worldwide will be a priority, as will the fight against terrorism, organised crime, money laundering and drug misuse and trafficking at home and abroad.

My Government will seek to restore confidence in the integrity of the nation's political system by upholding the highest standards of honesty and propriety in public life. They will consider how the funding of political parties should be regulated and reformed.

They will programme House of Commons business to ensure more effective scrutiny of Bills and better use of the time of Members of the House of Commons. During the course of the session, my Government will also publish in draft for public consultation a number of Bills, which they intend to introduce in subsequent sessions of this Parliament. They will propose the establishment of a new Select Committee of the House of Commons to look at ways of making Parliamentary procedure more effective and efficient.

Other measures will be laid before you.

My Lords and Members of the House of Commons

I pray that the blessing of Almighty God may rest upon your counsels.

Debate on the Address

[FIRST DAY]

Madam Speaker: I must now give some information to hon. Members that might prove helpful. The proposed pattern during the remaining days of debate on the Queen's Address is as follows: Thursday 15 May, work, welfare, education and health; Friday 16 May, the constitution; Monday 19 May, home affairs; Tuesday 20 May, the economy and European affairs. Hon. Members may like to make a note of that.

I shall now call the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman) to move the motion on the Loyal Address, which will be seconded by the hon. Member for Sunderland, South (Mr. Mullin).

2.50 pm

Mr. Gerald Kaufman (Manchester, Gorton): I beg to move.

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty as follows:
Most Gracious Sovereign.

We, Your Majesty's most dutiful and loyal subjects, the Commons of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland in Parliament assembled, beg leave to offer our humble thanks to Your Majesty for the Gracious Speech which Your Majesty has addressed to both Houses of Parliament.

Madam Speaker, you will recall that yesterday evening I asked whether you would allow me to sing while moving the motion today. Having made inquiries about my vocal abilities, you strictly forbade me from doing so—thus demonstrating the solicitude for right hon. and hon. Members that ensured your unopposed election as Speaker last week. Accordingly, I am precluded from treating the House to prolonged extracts from the musical "Hello Dolly" that I had intended to sing. Therefore, I must confine myself simply to the following: "Hello, Tony; Hello, Johnny, it's so nice to see you back where you belong".

Madam Speaker, this is the first speech that I have made from this side of the House for more than 18 years and it is my first speech as a Government Back Benchers. I shall therefore be unprecedentedly—and, quite possibly, unpeatedly—loyal. Indeed, let me dispel immediately any doubts that malicious people may have propagated: it is my firm intention to speak in favour of this Queen's Speech.

I first heard that I had been selected to move the motion when I received a telephone call on Monday afternoon. A portentously official-sounding voice said, in ominous tones, "The Government Chief Whip would like to speak to you." I was immediately struck with terror that I had violated the parliamentary Labour party's new and extremely stringent code of discipline. My mind went back guiltily to a general election campaign meeting last month during which I had been reckless enough to utter the word "socialism". Moreover, I had shared the platform with a trade union leader. I knew that I could not hope for leniency in the light of such transgressions.

However, it turned out that my fears were groundless and that my right hon. Friend was inviting me to move the motion to which I am now speaking. I therefore cast around in my mind for some explanation for my being singled out in this way. I want to make clear that in order to obtain this distinction, I did not send boxes of

chocolates or bunches of flowers to either the Prime Minister or the Chief Whip; nor did I invite them out to dinner. Apart from anything else, on a Back Benchers' salary I cannot afford the prices at Granita. Nor have I ever said that there is "something of the night" about the Chief Whip—even if I have thought it.

I recall that recently, during a broadcast on a Radio 4 programme appropriately called "Loose Ends", I announced myself to be a total sycophant of the Prime Minister. However, before preening myself too much, I do realise that under the iron heel of the Minister without Portfolio, my hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson), total sycophancy must be regarded as a suspiciously lukewarm form of loyalty. It is out of fear of my hon. Friend that I refrain today from referring to reports circulating in the film industry that Hugh Grant is to portray the Prime Minister in a forthcoming horror film called "Demon Eyes over Westminster".

I then wondered whether my selection came under the Government's scheme to encourage small businesses by promoting my book, "How to be a Minister"—or whether, indeed, the whole Labour landslide of 1 May was a subtle promotion ploy for my book.

Whatever the reason, there is no doubt that my being chosen to move this motion is a great honour for my constituency. This is the first time in its 112-year existence that the Gorton constituency has had its Member selected to move the Loyal Address. My constituents are forthright folk, as befits northerners who speak their minds. I recall that at Christmas 1989—in those increasingly remote days when Finchley was a Conservative-held constituency and Margaret Thatcher was its Member of Parliament—I attended at the excellent Wright Robinson high school in my constituency a performance of the musical "Grease" given by the pupils for old-age pensioners.

During the interval there was a refreshment period, and I moved from table to table, making my number with my constituents. One of them at a neighbouring table beckoned me over—and when a Gorton old-age pensioner beckons you over, you go. She said to me, "I have been watching Parliament on television and I have been watching that Mrs. Thatcher. She tells a lot of lies." I mumbled some kind of assent, but she went on to say, "Mind you, I have been watching you and you tell a lot of lies, too." I hope you will appreciate, Madam Speaker, what a privilege it is to represent such people.

Whatever my own merits or otherwise, my constituency fully deserves any honour conferred on it. Gorton is without doubt a cut above any other part of Manchester—when it deigns to acknowledge that it is a part of Manchester, rather than the independent local authority it once was. For an inner-city area, it is remarkably green, with many fine parks, one of which marks the farthest limits of the Danish invasion of England. Yes, it was Manchester which scored the first recorded success for Euro-scepticism.

My constituents have access to only one open tract of unspoilt countryside—Kingswater park. We shall be looking to the Government to help prevent North West Water from ruining this green lung by an asset-stripping exercise that would turn it into a hideous business park.

[Mr. Gerald Kaufman]

My constituency has been home to distinguished artists and authors. L. S. Lowry lived in the Rusholme area for a time; Anthony Burgess was educated at Xaverian college, from which I am quite sure that he did not derive any inspiration for his book "A Clockwork Orange".

Appleby Lodge is a haven for musicians. Sir John Barbirolli had a flat there. So, more recently, did the distinguished authority on Verdi operas and conductor of the BBC Philharmonic, Sir Edward Downes. I canvassed Sir Edward at Appleby Lodge during one election, and the House will be gratified to learn that the outcome was: old music, new Labour.

Appleby Lodge is on Wilmslow road, and a 500-yard stretch of that road contains some 40 Asian restaurants and takeaways, known collectively, if exaggeratedly, as Curry Mile. With a £70 million annual turnover, Curry Mile is evidence of the entrepreneurship and hard work of my Asian constituents. When they read the Queen's Speech, they will be gratified to note the priority assigned to the promotion of human rights worldwide. They are already delighted with the admirable and courageous commitment made by my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary to seek to assist in bringing about a solution, so long delayed, to the problems of the beautiful but tormented state of Jammu and Kashmir. They will regard the Gracious Speech as reinforcing that commitment.

Gorton was once a proud centre of heavy industry. The railway museum in York contains magnificent locomotives manufactured at the Peacock works in Gorton. But my constituents do not want to moulder away in an industrial museum. A quarter of households in my constituency are without a wage earner. Gorton possesses the unenviable distinction of being number one in England for youth unemployment. My constituents will welcome the promise in the Gracious Speech to introduce a windfall tax to help banish the scourge of youth unemployment. With many of those who have work being paid a pittance, my constituents will welcome the commitment to introduce a national minimum wage.

We have a desperate housing problem brought about by the previous Government's destruction of the local authority building programme, so my constituents will welcome the Bill to enable capital receipts from council house sales to be invested in housebuilding and renovation.

We have some of the country's worst crime rates in my constituency. Indeed, I have been shot at myself on the streets of the Anson estate, although I was not completely sure whether that was an act of random criminality or a particularly pointed political criticism.

People of all ages, but particularly the elderly, live in fear not only of burglary, robbery and vandalism, but of noisy behaviour and mindless hooliganism. My constituents will look with anticipation to the promised legislation to combat crime and anti-social behaviour and will welcome the introduction of new criminal offences of racial attack and racial harassment. Above all, my constituents will welcome the Government's first priority—education.

Curiously and anomalously, my deprived and all too frequently impoverished constituency contains three assisted places schools. The best known of these is

Manchester grammar school, an admirable enough institution in its way but situated incongruously in the middle of areas of unemployment and deprivation. For many years, I represented both Manchester grammar school and Belle Vue zoo. I have to say that I got more votes out of Belle Vue zoo.

This year, £2,250 million will go to assisted places at the three schools. Exactly 95 of my constituents benefit from that £2,250 million, which is paid for by the parents of the 14,200 pupils who attend state schools in my constituency. The people of Gorton will welcome the Government's commitment to phase out the assisted places scheme and to use the money for the 14,200 rather than the 95.

My constituents will be delighted that the Government's majority is big enough to preclude what happened the last time that Labour won on election, in 1974. The House will recall that in that year, because of an indecisive result in February, the country had to vote again in October. During the February election campaign, my agent sent me to canvass in Shelford avenue in the Longsight ward. I knocked at a house and a woman came to the door. She took a look at me, and I told her that I was her candidate for Parliament. She said, "We only see you when elections come around." I mumbled some unconvincing explanation and went on my way.

In the October election, my agent again sent me to canvass in Shelford avenue. I knocked at the same house and the same woman came to the door. She took a look at me, and said, "Oh, it's you is it? You're always round here." That is the majesty of the electorate.

The people of Gorton have voted for a Labour Government at every election. They did so even in 1983—the year in which someone described the Labour election manifesto as the longest suicide note in history. The rest of the country has now caught up with Gorton. My constituents look forward to benefiting from this belated outbreak of good sense. I wish the Government well.

3.5 pm

Mr. Chris Mullin (Sunderland, South): Things are looking up. On Monday, I was allocated an office with a window, thereby fulfilling one of my few remaining political ambitions. Today, I have the honour of seconding my right hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman) on the Gracious Speech. This is the point at which to express my gratitude to the Chief Whip for giving me sufficient notice to enable me to transfer my suit from the north end of the country to the south in time for this occasion.

It is a pleasure to follow my right hon. Friend. It may be of comfort to him to know that I had the word "socialist" written on my election address and it did not do me any harm. [Interruption.] Time will tell. Yesterday, my right hon. Friend pointed out to me that there is a little known tradition in the House. Every time that Labour wins by a landslide, one of the hon. Members for Sunderland is called upon to second the Loyal Address. In 1945, it was Fred Willey, and today that honour falls to me.

As hon. Members know, we count the votes very fast in Sunderland. For 20 minutes on the evening of 1 May, I was the only Member of Parliament in the country. It occurred to me that there was a slim window of opportunity, should I care to seize it, to form my own

Government. I would have had to be Chancellor of the Exchequer, Foreign Secretary and Prime Minister, but that has not done the Sultan of Oman any harm—although, time will tell about that, too. On reflection, I came to the conclusion that, were I to do anything of the sort, some of my friends in high places would not be entirely amused. Had I done so, instead of standing here today addressing you, Madam Speaker, I might have been trying to smuggle you a message from the Tower of London.

My route to respectability has been an odd one. When I was first elected in 1987, *The Sun* published photographs across a full page of what it called "Kinnock's Top Ten Loony Tunes": I was No. 8. If my memory serves me right, at least one of those who was higher than I in that top 10 has been appointed to the Government—I shall mention no names.

I now keep my *Sun* headlines framed on the wall of my study at home. There is "Mr. Odious". Yes, I once briefly displaced my hon. Friend the Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone) as the most odious man in Britain—the highest honour that *The Sun* can confer. There is

"Loony MP backs bomb gang".

which was given a full front page, and

"Twenty things you didn't know about crackpot Chris".

I did not know most of them either.

"Poor Sunderland".

wrote Lord Chapple in the *Daily Mail* on hearing the news of my selection in 1985.

"First its football team is relegated and now comes even worse news."

Well, I am sorry to say that our football team has just been relegated again, but we do not need any sympathy from Lord Chapple. Sunderland has been through hard times in the past, and has survived; as before, we will pick ourselves up, dust ourselves down and come out fighting. Sunderland looks to the future, not the past, and we shall soon be back in the premier league.

Plenty in today's Gracious Speech will be welcomed by the people of Sunderland, who have suffered more than most in the past 18 years. In particular, my constituents will welcome the emphasis on tackling youth unemployment. Like the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member for Gorton, Sunderland contains a great deal of unemployment, which lies at the root of many of our problems. To move a quarter of a million people aged under 25 from welfare into work, education or other meaningful activity is not a small ambition; it is a large one, and a great deal hinges on it. Only by reducing the huge amount of public money that past Administrations have squandered to maintain millions in enforced idleness will we liberate the funds that we need so urgently to spend on schools, hospitals and all the other things that we care about.

The minimum wage and the social chapter will be especially welcomed by my constituents. Indeed, I think that they will be welcomed by decent people of all persuasions, who know full well that a bottom line must be drawn under the way in which people can be treated. The lowest wage that I have come across in my constituency in the past few years was 89p an hour, and wages between £1.70 and £2 an hour are not uncommon. The contracting-out culture has led to the creation of a new class of poor, who are often worse off than those on benefit.

I am thinking of school dinner ladies, hospital cleaners, care assistants, private security guards and a host of others. They are all people who do important but undervalued work; they are all people who, as a result of the Thatcher decade, no longer qualify for holiday or sickness pay, or for a little basic job security—things that we used quaintly to associate with civilisation. The minimum wage and the social chapter will make the lives of such people a little easier: I welcome that, and so, I think, will most sensible people.

The minimum wage will also save us some public money. We shall no longer have to spend several billion pounds of taxpayers' money on subsidising some of our worst employers with family credit, earnings top-up and the like. Our opponents sometimes ask where we will get the money to fund our other programmes; well, there is a couple of billion for starters.

Like those of my right hon. Friend the Member for Gorton, my constituents will also welcome the Government's plans for reform of the youth justice system. We must deal more swiftly and effectively with the small minority of juveniles who are making the lives of respectable people a misery. No one is under any illusions, however. In the long term, the only way in which to reduce the tidal wave of crime and mayhem unleashed by the Thatcher decade is to provide all our young people with a sense of purpose in life.

I am glad to note that the Government intend to ban handguns. That measure interests me particularly, because last summer I drafted the minority report of the Home Affairs Select Committee, which recommended exactly that. I hope that, in due course, it will also be possible to tighten the laws relating to shotguns, and to bring air weapons within the licensing system. A great deal of low-level mayhem is caused by youths with air weapons.

I am delighted too that the Government intend to regulate the funding of political parties, another matter in which, you may recall, Madam Speaker, I have long taken an interest. It is about time that we had a level playing field in that area. How can it be right in a democracy for the funding of one political party to remain a secret even from its own members? While we are about it, we might consider the mysterious process by which at election time the drinks and tobacco industry make available many of the most prominent advertising hoardings in the country exclusively to the Conservative party.

Finally, I was heartened to see that the Government have chosen to highlight their commitment to tackling global poverty and to promote sustainable development. All civilised people are looking forward to our overseas aid budget increasing from the miserable level to which it has sunk under previous Administrations—[*Interruption.*] I said all civilised people.

It is not just a question of aid, however. We must work with our partners in Europe and elsewhere to reduce the huge burden of debt under which so many of the poorest countries labour. In my previous incarnation I was a journalist and, in that capacity, I travelled in some of the poorest parts of the world. I briefly attended the wars in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, and I travelled widely in China, India and Afghanistan. Some of the scenes that I have witnessed remain printed indelibly on my mind. We cannot credibly talk of building one nation in Britain while ignoring the unspeakable suffering that afflicts so many of our fellow human beings.

[Mr. Chris Mullin]

I would not be human if I did not derive a little pleasure from waking up in the morning and hearing senior Conservatives on the "Today" programme debating how to make their party electable again. This morning it was the turn of the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke). No doubt they will succeed one day—not too soon, I hope. Perhaps on the strength of 13 days in the party of Government, I could offer a word of advice: go back to one-nation politics. In the long run, it will be better for us all and better for the country as a whole. [Interruption.] Yes, that is the limit of my advice. There are several possible candidates.

Madam Speaker, you may vaguely recall that some years ago I wrote a novel about a Labour Government who achieved a landslide victory. It was skilfully adapted for television by Mr. Alan Plater—with a little help, if I am not mistaken, from Mr. Alastair Campbell, whose influence even then was considerable—and shown in more than 30 countries. My Prime Minister was a Sheffield steel worker called Harry Perkins, played by a great actor, the late Ray McAnally. Harry Perkins briefly became a cult figure. So popular was he that there was even a modest write-in vote for him in the 1983 Labour party leadership election.

My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister bears no resemblance at all to Harry Perkins, but he is in his way every bit as radical. He has the same steely determination to make the world a better place. He also possesses some great strengths that Harry Perkins did not have: he understands middle England, he thinks long term and he knows that, to make a serious impact, he must have two terms of office, not one.

The programme that today's Gracious Speech outlines lays the foundation of a new era; an era in which we will seek to heal the wounds of the past; an era in which we will compete for office on the basis of appeals to the best, rather than the meanest, instincts of our people; and an era in which, as I said on election night, Britain will be governed in the interests of all its citizens and not just in the interests of the fortunate. I commend the Gracious Speech to the House.

3.19 pm

Mr. John Major (Huntingdon): Parliament is only a few days old, yet we have already lost one of our most distinguished senior colleagues, Michael Shersby. Many of the new Members present today may not have known Michael, but those old or new Members who did know him knew a kind, gentle and good House of Commons man. We will all miss him.

We will also miss other hon. Members whom we lost towards the end of the last Parliament. I recall particularly my colleague, Barry Porter, and Martin Redmond, both of whom showed the most incredible courage in the face of inevitable defeat by their similar, dreadful illnesses. Every-one who spoke to them or knew them during that dreadful time was moved by the immense courage shown by them and their families. There was also my colleague, Iain Mills, who died so tragically towards the end of the last Parliament. We remember them with affection and respect for their service to their constituents and their country.

The right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman) moved the Loyal Address with his customary skill and wit and in his customary suit. When

he was speaking, I suddenly remembered how much he loves ice cream, and now I think I know why. What the right hon. Gentleman did not disclose was his clear financial interest in the change of Government. It is a substantial interest, because the right hon. Gentleman stands to make rather a lot from the future sales of his book "How to be a Minister". I can thoroughly recommend it. When he wrote it, he had just left office and I thought that, having just lost an election, he had rather a cheek to write such a book. Now I am not so sure that that is the case.

The book is in hot demand and I can thoroughly recommend it. [Interruption.] The Foreign Secretary has woken up. Let me tell him that one can always prepare. To those on the Front Bench who are after the Library copy of the book, I must say that I have it. It is available for private sector loan to anyone requiring it. It contains some excellent advice on such everyday subjects as how to get on with No. 10. That is useful reading for any new Minister. How to get on with the press is clearly best not talked about while the Minister without Portfolio is around. There is also a chapter on how to lose office gracefully, to which new Ministers may not wish to turn for a week or two, but I advise them to tuck it away.

There will have to be changes to the right hon. Gentleman's excellent book, because it was written a long time ago and things have changed. We then had Prime Minister's Question Time twice a week, which is specifically mentioned in the book. The chapter on working with No. 10 says:

"Your meeting with the Prime Minister is over. You are now a member of the Government. What will your relationship be with the Prime Minister who has just appointed you? Clearly it cannot be what it was just 10 minutes ago".

In those far-off days, there was no such thing as "Call me Tony" in the mind of the right hon. Gentleman.

The chapter on working with the press is intriguing, because it goes back to the time when colleagues in Parliament were allowed to meet or lunch with journalists without the approval of the chief press secretary or other senior Ministers. I know that the Prime Minister is anxious to keep close control over his Ministers and his parliamentary colleagues. I want to tell him discreetly—I have learned that if one wants to keep something discreet, one says it in the House of Commons and no one reports it—that I have some sympathy with him in that objective and some doubt as to whether he will be able to achieve it over time.

The right hon. Member for Gorton is a formidable opponent, as I have found to my cost from time to time. When I first became Foreign Secretary—thought at the time to be a somewhat surprising appointment, which lasted for a glorious 94 days—the right hon. Gentleman was generous enough to say that I had never been beyond Land's End. He was speaking in Bognor at the time. He would have been right to say that I had never been to Land's End, but I think that he was seeking to make a point, which he did with great effectiveness.

Only a few weeks ago, I saw a moving article by the right hon. Member for Gorton about his mother. I believe that she would have been very proud of what he had to say today, and very proud of the way in which he said it. All who heard his speech heard a remarkable parliamentary performance, and I congratulate him on it without reservation.

The hon. Member for Sunderland, South (Mr. Mullin) spoke very well, and rather charmingly. He is a man of conviction, and he has even publicly conceded that he was a socialist. These days, therefore, he is something of a visionary. I do not share many of his political convictions, but I admire the courage and persistence with which, over the years, he has frequently and often with great success pursued unfashionable causes. He has often been proved right, despite incurring much odium along the way, and I much admire him for that.

As the hon. Member for Sunderland, South said, his result was the first to be announced in the general election. I heard that result, and I shuddered for new Labour, although perhaps I did not shudder quite as much as the Government Chief Whip. Nevertheless, the result was an intriguing prospect for those who have heard so much about the Government's programmes and know so much about the hon. Gentleman's convictions.

The hon. Member for Sunderland, South referred, with some charm, to the stories in *The Sun* about him, one of which he still has hanging on the wall of his house. I fear, however, that he is a little out of date on that newspaper. Perhaps he should visit Australia to discover precisely the current allegiance of *The Sun*. He will be in very serious trouble if he continues to attack it in that manner.

The hon. Member for Sunderland, South was also burgled. Like me, he lived for a while in Brixton—of which we are both very fond—and, at one stage, he was burgled regularly there. He put a note on his door, with his customary humour, which allegedly said, "I've been robbed so many times, if you find anything of value, you're welcome to it." I know how he feels. On policy, I almost put up a similar note—[Laughter.] I had planned on saying that I nearly put up a similar note on the door of the Cabinet room when I left it, but the House anticipated me.

The hon. Member for Sunderland, South—like the right hon. Member for Gorton—is also a prolific and distinguished author. He mentioned his excellent book "A Very British Coup". It was rather unwise of him to mention it, as it was unwise of the Prime Minister, or the Chief Whip, to invite him to second the Loyal Address. For those hon. Members who have not read the book—I am happy to publicise it also; I hope that it is still generally available—it is an excellent read. For those who have not read it, it is a political novel about a Labour Prime Minister, with an absolutely huge majority, who makes a complete muck-up of it and is deposed in a plot involving the Chancellor of the Exchequer. I believe that the Prime Minister's friends called him "Harry".

We have heard two excellent speeches in support of the Loyal Address. As the right hon. Member for Gorton said, it has been 23 years since we last heard two Labour Members move and second the Loyal Address. They were such excellent speeches that I believe that they would last for the next 23 years, if we were not to have the pleasure again for some time. The right hon. and hon. Gentlemen can be proud of their efforts.

I should deal with other matters. First, however, it is appropriate to congratulate the Prime Minister and the Labour party on their success in the general election, and I do so warm-heartedly. They have a comprehensive mandate to introduce their programme, but I hope that they will be careful about how they use their substantial majority in the House. I understand the attractiveness,

having achieved such a significant success in the general election, of moving speedily on many fronts. I also understand the attractiveness of sweeping aside some of the normal conventions to accomplish some of the goals about which the Prime Minister and his colleagues feel passionately.

The Prime Minister has made some political appointments to his private office, political appointments as his chief press secretary and other press secretaries, and changes—rather arbitrary changes—to Prime Minister's questions. I believe that the Prime Minister is right to consider the issue of Prime Minister's questions. I had no objection to that decision, although I share the view expressed by colleagues in a number of parties earlier that it would have been better if consultation had taken place before the decision was announced.

I believe also that it was unwise to rush ahead with a decision on the Bank of England that, similarly, was not discussed or considered in the House, or announced to it, or foreshadowed in the Labour general election manifesto. Those individual decisions are understandable, and no doubt taken in the first flush of enthusiasm, but I hope that the Government will reflect on the fact that the strict impartiality of the civil service is of great importance and the rights of Parliament should not be bypassed. I hope that that will be borne in mind for the future.

Although the Government have a mandate, so do Opposition Members. When the Government act sensibly, they will deserve cross-party support, and I hope that they can expect such support when it is in the national interest; but when it is not, they can expect, and will certainly be given, vigorous opposition.

This morning's Gracious Speech was made against a very unusual background for an incoming Government: the longest run of low inflation for 50 years, the lowest basic rate of tax for 60 years, rising employment and falling unemployment—down to 5.9 per cent. this morning after the success of the first fortnight of Labour Government—improving standards of health and education, the most competitive industry for decades and the lowest interest and mortgage rates for a generation, although, of course, before handing over to unelected officials one of his most important responsibilities, the Chancellor did raise interest rates, and with them the cost of mortgages.

The programme placed before the House and the country today is a mixed bag. It contains a great deal that we can support; indeed, if I may say so to the Prime Minister, some of the policies seem rather familiar. Strong defence based on NATO, the completion of the single market, reform of the common agricultural policy, a wider and more open Europe and, of course, a determination to pursue a peaceful settlement in Northern Ireland are among the matters on which the Government can legitimately look to wide cross-party support.

We also share some aspirations with the Government. I say that because, in many ways, although the desired outcome may be the same, we would seek to achieve that desired outcome in a very different way from that proposed by the Government. No one would disagree with the aim of higher standards in schools, although we would not necessarily agree with the way in which the new Secretary of State for Education and Employment would wish to achieve it. Better care in the health service and lower unemployment fall into the same category.

[Mr. John Major]

During this Session of Parliament, there will be many debates in which the objectives sought by Members on both sides of the Chamber are the same, but there may be fierce debates because we shall disagree about the means of achieving an undoubtedly desirable end.

The road to hell is paved with good intentions, and today's Gracious Speech is full of good intentions. It also contains some very bad policy. It heralds three new taxes—one retrospective, even before the emergency Budget, which must be something of a record for an incoming Government. It has a flawed devolution package, which I believe will be the subject of much debate. It reintroduces trade union immunities which will damage competitiveness, with a statutory right of recognition on a plant-by-plant basis.

Returning to the hon. Member for Sunderland, South and *The Sun*, with statutory trade union recognition on a plant-by-plant basis, one shop steward in one plant could prevent *The Sun* from being printed. That may not worry the hon. Gentleman much, but I believe that it would put the Treasury Bench in a great spin at the moment.

There are other areas of some importance. The reform of the social security system will continue to be one of the most important long-term questions confronting the Government. Let me say to the Prime Minister, we will welcome adventurous plans for reform that control costs and encourage the putting of people into work, and we will seek to be as constructive and co-operative as possible on that. I understand that the new Minister for Welfare Reform wishes every person to have his or her own personal pension fund. That is an admirable idea, but I cannot help remembering that, when we proposed that, the current Prime Minister and his colleagues turned it into one of the most outrageous scare stories of the last general election campaign. It would be a remarkable irony if the Prime Minister implemented that which he had previously denounced.

We have also been promised a Finance Bill. Next month's Budget will be only the first of a series of tax-raising Budgets to come. The Chancellor and the Prime Minister have made promises on tax; we shall see whether they are able to keep them. I predict that taxes will rise and rise because, with the pressures on them from their colleagues, the Government will not be able to keep public expenditure down.

The first tax increase is, of course, the retrospective windfall tax which we have been promised for some time. It is to be levied on an unknown number of companies at an unknown rate, but it will certainly come in the near future. It is presented as a tax on fat cats. It is, in fact, a tax on jobs, fuel bills, pensions and investments. We do not know precisely how much the Chancellor seeks to raise. Figures such as £3 billion, £5 billion and £10 billion have all been floated at different times. If £5 billion is to be raised and only half that tax is passed on in higher bills, the average household bill will rise by around £50. The real figure could be double or even quadruple that.

Labour Members may think that that is not very much for the use of that £5 billion, but 3 per cent. off VAT on fuel will cut bills by only 36p a week—a tiny offset of the likely increase in fuel bills to be caused by the windfall tax. I hope that the Prime Minister will tell us whether pensioners and others will be compensated for

any increase in fuel costs that follows the introduction of the windfall tax. We provided such compensation when VAT was increased.

The windfall tax also has rather magical properties. It is a one-off levy which is to fund expenditure year after year. Plainly it cannot. Either the job subsidy that it will fund will go or other taxes will rise—unless the windfall tax or some other tax is to become an annual event. Perhaps we can be told which it is to be.

Subsidised jobs, which is what the tax will pay for, will exist only while the subsidy lasts, unlike the 900,000 new jobs created without subsidy in recent years. Even the subsidy is inefficient. It is likely to force current employees out of their jobs, to be replaced by new employees who carry the subsidy. If Labour Members think that that is just a Tory scare, I refer them to the work of the National Institute of Economic and Social Research, which has concluded that such displacement would occur and the Government would achieve only around 40 per cent. of their jobs target—a figure that takes no account of job losses in the utilities that will be newly taxed.

What is to be the net result of the new windfall tax? It is likely to be higher fuel bills, which we might charitably regard as ironic after all that was said about VAT—although I doubt that those paying the higher bills or those losing their jobs as a result will feel that way. As I said, the road to hell is paved with good intentions.

That brings me to the Chancellor of the Exchequer and his extraordinary decision to hand over control of monetary policy to the Bank of England. The first question is whether there is a case for such a change. I concede that there is a case. I think that it is a bad case, but of course there is a case for handing the policy to the Bank of England. It is that politicians—Governments—cannot be trusted to keep inflation low. The previous Government kept inflation low, but the Chancellor clearly believes that that will not be possible for him. He may be right. For the sake of the country, I hope that, on monetary policy, he is right and that the move is a success, but I strongly doubt it.

Some commentators were surprised by the Chancellor's decision. I share their surprise. Only two or three months ago in a set-piece speech—not a casual answer to a casual question early in the morning—the Chancellor said that the Bank's recent record on monetary policy had been mixed. He said:

"the Bank must demonstrate a successful track record in its advice and build greater public credibility"

before it could control interest rates. By the time the Chancellor took his historic and, I believe, mistaken decision, he had seen the Bank demonstrate a track record. The only problem was that it was a track record of four days only. Two of those days were the weekend and one was a bank holiday. I am unsurprised, therefore, that the commentators were surprised.

The Chancellor claims that he is taking politics out of interest rate decisions. Glossing over the fact that I wonder what he thinks politicians are for if not to take decisions that affect millions of their fellow citizens, I make the point that he has not taken interest rate decisions out of politics at all. The decisions will be taken by a nine-member monetary policy committee headed by the Governor, appointed by the Chancellor, plus two deputy governors, appointed by the Chancellor, plus four experts,

appointed by the Chancellor, and two other Bank of England directors, appointed by the Governor who is appointed by the Chancellor. So much for taking politics out of interest rate decisions!

Will this historic change actually work? My fear is that it will work only too well. The Bank will meet its remit; of that we can be reasonably confident. To do so, it will if anything over-perform. It will over-deflate the economy to ensure that it meets the particular remit that the Chancellor has given. As a result, unemployment will be higher than it otherwise would be and growth will be lower than it otherwise would be. I fear that I must tell the Chancellor, from experience, that he will still get the blame for interest rate and mortgage rate rises, because when they go up, the Bank will blame spending or tax policies, or some other real or imagined horror that has emanated from the Government, so there will be no gain for the Chancellor there.

The Chancellor has handed a very important political power to unelected officials. He has damaged his choices as Chancellor of the Exchequer; he has taken a vital choice away from himself. He has damaged his choices in managing the economy, he has ensured that unemployment will grow and that growth will be held back, and he has done all that without debating with, considering or consulting the House of Commons on the decision. Although I know that the decision was well-meaning, I believe that the Chancellor will live to regret it because it is profoundly mistaken.

The Queen's Speech stated that education was to be a high priority. Again, I agree with that aspiration. Everyone wishes to see higher standards, and I am delighted that the percentage of pupils getting good examination results has doubled over the past few years. Here again, however, we share the aspiration but not the way in which to achieve it.

For example, the previous Government aimed to give more power to parents and to take it away from town halls, whereas the Prime Minister proposes precisely to reverse that process. Hundreds of thousands of parents have voted for their schools to be independent of local authority control, but the Prime Minister proposes to ride roughshod over their wishes.

That is not all. Local education authorities will have new powers over development plans and admission policies specifically at the expense of parents and school governors. The Government intend that despite the fact that, over many years, the worst-performing education authorities have consistently been Labour-controlled.

The changes offer a bleak prospect for the improvement of education standards. The assisted places scheme is to go because the Government do not believe that children from less well-off families should have the opportunity to attend good public schools. Such advantages for low-income families are plainly unacceptable to Labour. Only children whose parents can afford it can go to public schools. Under new Labour, the size of the wallet matters most in education.

The reason for that bit of ideological spite is, allegedly, to save money to reduce class sizes generally; but the figures do not, of course, remotely match, as the Chancellor and the Secretary of State for Education and Employment will find out. The children who will not get an assisted place will go elsewhere to be educated, putting up class sizes in the short term and eating into the savings.

Some independent estimates—not mine—suggest that to meet the Government's objectives on class sizes, they will need £250 million over and above the savings that will arise from the abolition of the assisted places scheme. Where will the money come from? The answer will be either higher taxes, more borrowing or cuts in other programmes, but their objectives certainly cannot be met without extra money.

The Government's education priorities are very lopsided. They include worthy aims such as higher standards and the new targets set by the Secretary of State for Education and Employment—which are similar to the ones that we would have set had we won the election, as we announced during the election campaign. Other objectives may prove worth while, such as a general teaching council, but alongside that lies the traditional enmity of the Labour party towards grammar schools, city technology colleges, grant-maintained schools and parental choice through vouchers and assisted places. The overall balance of the Government's education programme is very negative and, frankly, rather depressing.

Let me now turn to the centrepiece of the Government's programme—devolution. I concede that, on devolution, they have always had the best slogans but the worst arguments. The Gracious Speech provides for referendums in Scotland and Wales on a devolved Scottish Parliament and a Welsh Assembly. If the proposals are approved, legislation will follow.

As the Prime Minister knows, I believe that it is a profoundly dangerous policy, but he has clearly won the right to put it before the House of Commons. I hope that he will share with us the importance of the issue and the fact that, before voting in the referendums, the people of Scotland and Wales need to know all the implications involved.

Can the Prime Minister now confirm to the House that constitutional Bills will be taken here on the Floor of the House in accordance with convention? Can he please do so this afternoon? The Minister without Portfolio wriggled unmercifully on the radio the other day without giving any coherent answer to that plain, straightforward question. So I repeat it: can the Prime Minister confirm that the Bills will be taken on the Floor of the House? Can he promise that they will not be smuggled upstairs to a Committee stacked full of enthusiasts who will not properly examine the measures?

Can the Prime Minister tell us why he favours a tax-raising assembly in Scotland and a non-tax-raising assembly in Wales? Can he tell us why Scottish Members should be able to vote on such matters as health and education in England and Wales, whereas English, Welsh and Northern Irish Members will not be able to vote on those matters as they affect Scotland? It is not just the West Lothian question; it is the west Dorset, west Hampshire and west Lancashire question, and we still await an answer.

When the Prime Minister was asked for his answer to that question, he said that it was the same as he had always given, but he has never given an answer. Will he do so this afternoon? Will he let Scottish Members sit as Ministers running Departments and managing English affairs? The Foreign Secretary once memorably said that, as a Scottish Member, he would not be able to do that if there was a Scottish Parliament. Does the Prime Minister

[Mr. John Major]

agree? Why is it Government policy at present to have a tax-raising Parliament in Scotland, which the Welsh Secretary described as "economic illiteracy" in Wales? Can the Prime Minister answer those and the many other questions that will follow about his devolution policy?

Devolution of power, whether to Scotland, Wales or the Bank of England, inevitably takes power from the House of Commons, as does the Government's known policy for the Amsterdam summit in a month's time. In various important matters, our veto—in essence, our right to say no unilaterally if we choose to do so—will be unilaterally abolished. It will go on environmental policy, social policy, industrial policy and regional policy. Our right to stay out of the working time directive and the social chapter will go—an extraordinary policy for a Government claiming to be business friendly. With three new taxes, new trade union rights, a muddled policy on late payments and more taxes to come, that is a dubious proposition. If that is their idea of being friendly, thank heavens we do not have a Government who are hostile to business.

Of course there is a genuine disagreement between the parties over many European policies, but once a veto is surrendered at Amsterdam, Britain will have no right at any stage in the future to say, "No, we do not want those policies here," or to reverse those policies if they fail. The Prime Minister knows that. I therefore have a suggestion, which I hope he will find helpful. If he thinks that the policies are right, why does he not bring legislation before the House and let hon. Members decide through free debate and discussion? If we get it wrong, successive Governments can change it; but if we surrender the power to our partners, we can never change it—regardless of whether it proves to be right or wrong. Will the Prime Minister bring the measures before the House of Commons?

In the debate on the Gracious Speech, many of my right hon. Friends will want to raise a series of detailed points about the plans that the Government have set before the nation. The Opposition will do so, as far as is practicable, in a spirit of friendly co-operation. None the less, we will raise questions to which legitimately not only the House but the country require an answer. I hope that, notwithstanding the size of the Government's majority, Ministers will be prepared to give free and frank responses to such questions during the debate.

At the start of a new Parliament, a new Government deserve some good will and some luck. I willingly give them the good will and, for the sake of the country, I wish them luck. They begin their term of office with a large majority, a sparkling economy and unemployment below 6 per cent.—and falling rapidly. No Government have ever had such an inheritance. That inheritance was won despite the daily opposition and obstruction of many of the hon. Members who now sit in office and on the Government Benches. I hope that, despite all that they did to prevent us from reaching the very attractive economic situation, they will not wreck it through the policies that they will follow in the months to come. In the interests of the British nation, I wish them success; in the interests of the House, I hope that they will face us not as though they have a majority of 179 but with frank and open responses to the legitimate concerns of the Opposition and the country.

3.51 pm

The Prime Minister (Mr. Tony Blair): I am deeply honoured to speak to the first Queen's Speech for more than 18 years to be put to Parliament and the British people by a new Labour Government.

I join the Leader of the Opposition in paying respect to Sir Michael Shersby, Barry Porter, Iain Mills and, of course, Martin Redmond, all of whom we in the House remember with very great affection.

I also pay tribute to the witty and excellent speeches made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman) and my hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland, South (Mr. Mullin). My right hon. Friend is renowned throughout the House for his wit. Indeed, I recall one of the first shadow Cabinet meetings that I attended under a previous leader, when the leader explained that a shadow Minister was absent because he had just had an operation on his throat and was able to speak out of only one side of his mouth. My right hon. Friend interjected, "So it was not wholly successful then." I will not describe the shadow Minister.

There are two copies of the great tome, "How to be a Minister", in the House of Commons Library—I have the other here. I think that one of the most interesting things about it is the eulogy printed on its cover, which says:

"This is the one book I recommend to all my colleagues upon first taking office. It remains the best guide."

Underneath is written:

"The right hon. Kenneth Clarke".

Now we know what went wrong under the previous Administration. If those are the precepts that the previous Government followed, I may have to forbid its being read by Ministers. [HON. MEMBERS: "Oh."] It is always as well to start as one means to go on.

The wit of my right hon. Friend the Member for Gorton is well known, but he has another side, which you, Madam Speaker, and I, know as well. When I first came into the House in 1983, he was a model of encouragement, support and friendship to me and to many younger Members of Parliament. I salute him for being not only a great wit and parliamentarian, but a good and loyal friend.

My hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland, South, in an excellent speech, mentioned, like the Leader of the Opposition—I have to keep remembering to get that right—"A Very British Coup". I like to think that we have performed something of our own very British coup with 419 Members of Parliament.

One of the things that the Leader of the Opposition said that I particularly want to echo is that my hon. Friend has not merely given sterling service in the House, but is acknowledged throughout the country and on both sides of the House as someone of independent reason and integrity. He fought causes that were deeply unpopular, was often excoriated for doing so, but persisted none the less, and, thanks to him, people who should never have been in prison are free today.

The Leader of the Opposition spoke with considerable dignity and, again, I pay tribute to him for that. However, at times he was refighting the election campaign somewhat. I cannot, of course, agree with his judgment on the last five years of Conservative government, and neither did the British people. They know that their schools and hospitals, and the safety on their streets—the state of Britain—are not as good as they should be after 18 years of Conservative government.

We had the usual ritual scares about what a Labour Government would do and how terrible that would be for the country, but those scares just do not work any more. People know them to be false and they rejected them at the election. If Conservative Members have learnt no lessons from their election defeat, they had better prepare themselves for the next one.

Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): Will the Prime Minister give way?

The Prime Minister: It is always a pleasure to give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Leigh: The right hon. Gentleman mentions the general election campaign. Whatever the rights or wrongs of the decision, why did not he share with the British people his intention, four days after winning the general election, to abolish democratic control over the cost of borrowing?

The Prime Minister: If the hon. Gentleman had read the Labour party's manifesto with sufficient care, he would have seen quite plainly set out that we want to move to a more independent form of political decision making. I shall come to that point specifically a little later.

There are two simple reasons for my party's historic victory in the election. The first is the Conservative party and the second is the Labour party. The Conservative Government lost touch with the instincts and aspirations of the British people; they broke their election promises; they were more interested in fighting among themselves than fighting for the interests of the country; but most of all they settled for second best for a great country whose people know that it can do better than the Conservative Government did.

I believe that our victory was testament to something else—the huge changes in the Labour party. Just as the Conservatives were changing for the worse, my party was changing for the better. The election was a vote of confidence in today's Labour party. People's worries about health, education, jobs and crime are what we are pledged to put right, and they are at the heart of the Queen's Speech.

We speak as the one nation party in British politics today. Anyone who doubts that needs only look around the House today. They will see Labour Members of Parliament from every part of the country; every region, every nation. We speak for the whole nation and we shall serve the whole nation. The Queen's Speech represents the alliance of progress and justice too long absent from British politics under Conservative government.

Our mandate is clear—to modernise what is out-dated, to make fair what is unjust, and to do both by the best means available, irrespective of dogma or doctrine, without fear or favour. There is much to do.

The Leader of the Opposition asked, in effect, what was wrong with Britain after 18 years of Conservative government. It was as if he could barely believe that the people had been so unreasonable as to put him out after all the good service that his Government had given. I will tell him what is wrong with the country today, and what we can do to put it right. I say that it is a betrayal of our future that in Britain, in 1997, almost half of our 11-year-olds cannot read or add up properly. In this

Queen's Speech, we start to put that right. [HON. MEMBERS: "Labour councils."] Even now, Conservative Members will not take responsibility for the situation that they have created.

I say that our national health service cannot and should not be run like some supermarket, as it was under the Conservatives, but should be run as a proper public service. I say that it is intolerable that many of our elderly citizens live in fear of persistent juvenile offenders running riot. In this Queen's Speech, we take the action to put a stop to it.

I say that it is an offence to the politics of one nation that we have a large number of young people idle, leading wasted lives, on benefit, with no hope of getting off benefit. In this Queen's Speech, we start to put that right.

I say that it is wrong that small business men and women wait in vain for their debts to be paid by bigger firms that can afford to pay them. Again, in this Queen's Speech, we put the power in their hands to right the wrongs done to them.

I say that it is humiliating that this country of ours, which has held the balance of power in Europe, and often beyond, for centuries, should have been confined to the margins of influence where the last Government dragged us. We will put leadership in place of isolationism.

I also say that a Britain that is young of mind and confident of its future must change a situation in which unelected quangos spend more money than elected local government, and where foreign donors can bankroll parties of government. In this Queen's Speech, we will clean up politics and restore faith in our public life.

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): Will the Prime Minister give way?

The Prime Minister: In a moment.

There was a lot of talk during the election campaign that there would be no difference between the parties. I think that, in 12 short days, that has been exposed as the nonsense that it always was. There will be one other difference. This Government will keep their promises. [Interruption.] Conservative Members find that an extraordinary proposition. They are startled that anyone should say such a thing. On education, on health, on jobs, on crime and on the economy, the people's priorities are our priorities and the people's concerns are our concerns; radical, modern and very definitely new Labour.

We said that education should be our No. 1 priority, and it is. Education is the key both to the extension of personal opportunity and choice and to the nation's future prosperity. Today we will earn by what we learn. There is much to do—in the standards in our schools and in the skills of our work force. The measures that we will introduce in this Session of Parliament will begin the task of overcoming that education deficit.

First, we will phase out the assisted places scheme, which provides subsidy to fewer than 40,000 children in private schools, and use the money to cut class sizes to 30 or under for all five, six and seven-year-olds.

Secondly, we will introduce a Bill to tackle the key obstacles that hold back educational achievement. Every school and every local education authority will have year-on-year targets for improvement. Where a school or LEA cannot improve, new management will be sent in to

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clear out problems. Head teachers will be given new, proper qualifications before taking charge in any school. We will introduce a new procedure for removing teachers who are sub-standard.

We believe firmly in the idea of home-school contracts that set out the rights and responsibilities of parents, schools and children. We will introduce such contracts in all our schools over time.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): A good Tory measure.

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman says that it is a good Tory measure, but the Tories refused to introduce the measure that we are now introducing, thank you very much.

In addition to legislation, there will be fresh action on truancy, discipline in the classroom and homework guidelines in primary and secondary schools.

For years I have made clear our belief that information technology holds huge potential for our education system. We will be moving forward, with the help of the independent Stevenson committee, which we set up in opposition, on linking schools and colleges to the information superhighway; training teachers in the use of new technology—[Interruption.] I find this unbelievable. There they are; I can see them. Let me tell Conservative Members that nothing gladdens my heart so much as to see how little they have changed their behaviour and attitudes. They just do not get it. When we talk about bringing new technology into our schools, millions of people out there welcome it, and they want to see—

Mr. Peter Luff (Mid-Worcestershire): It is already there.

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman should go and talk to teachers in our schools. Then he would see how much needs to be done.

Every aspect of our school system that is not succeeding will be tackled. For too long we have known what makes for a good school—a good head teacher, motivated staff, high standards of excellence, smaller classes, and proper equipment and facilities. Now, at long last, we have a Government dedicated to bringing the best to all the schools in the country. Building the best educated and skilled nation in the western world will take time; of course it will—but at least now we are making a start.

I want this Government to be long-termism in action. There is no better example of that than the Chancellor of the Exchequer's decision, announced last Tuesday, to give the Bank of England independence in the setting of interest rates. Governments should not be able to play politics with people's mortgages, and the move is both right and long overdue.

I can tell the Leader of the Opposition that boom and bust, especially Tory boom and bust, has been the bane of British economic life for much of this century. It damages industry and deters investment. Even now, manufacturing investment is down 8 per cent. on last year. Manufacturing employment, too, has fallen over the past 12 months. Our population is the same as that of France,

but the British economy is 20 per cent. smaller than the French economy. Full-time male employment is lower today than it was six years ago.

I am afraid that I have to tell the right hon. Gentleman that, under his stewardship, despite North sea oil, and despite asset sales, the national debt doubled, and borrowing was allowed to get out of control. Over the past 18 years, under Conservative Governments, we have had the two worst recessions since the war. That is precisely what we want to put a stop to.

Yes, today we are no longer mired in the recession into which the Conservatives took us, but we must make any recovery last. Wise finance and stable economic management are the preconditions of allowing the supply-side measures on jobs, skills, investment and small businesses to work.

The right hon. Gentleman attacked us over our proposal for small businesses. Much action is being planned outside the Queen's Speech to help small businesses, but I believe that they will be greatly assisted by our proposal to give them the right to claim, by statute, interest on outstanding debts. That is a power that they have needed for a long time, and we shall give it to them.

Mr. Alex Salmond (Banff and Buchan): Will the Prime Minister give way?

The Prime Minister: In a moment.

In addition to those measures, we shall send a strong pro-competition signal to business, with the publication and enactment of the new competition Bill, which will radically streamline our competition laws and replace the existing Restrictive Trade Practices Act 1976. It will remove unnecessary burdens from business and introduce a new approach to anti-competitive agreements and the abuse of market power.

Mr. Salmond: Will the Prime Minister clarify something for me? I was on "The World at One" with the Deputy Prime Minister, who in an interview twice said that the devolution Bill might not be published until after the referendum in Scotland. That cannot be right. Will the right hon. Gentleman confirm the position of the Scottish Office—that the devolution Bill will be published this summer and the referendum will be in the autumn? Can he tell the House exactly when he expects to publish the Scottish devolution Bill?

The Prime Minister: Of course the Bill will be published in time for the referendum, because the referendum will take place on those proposals. As the hon. Gentleman has asked me a question, perhaps I may ask him one, too. Will the Scottish National party now support our case in the referendum?

Mr. Salmond: When the Prime Minister publishes the White Paper, he will have his answer.

The Prime Minister: I suspect that we shall wait a lot longer than that for the answer.

I want Britain to be a nation of entrepreneurs: a nation where talent and ability flourish.

Rev. Ian Paisley (North Antrim): I note that the Queen's Speech affirms that there will be referendums in

Scotland and Wales. The right hon. Gentleman is well aware that a promise was made to those who would take part in the present talks in Northern Ireland that, whatever the outcome of those talks, there would be a referendum for the people of Northern Ireland. Will he confirm that commitment?

The Prime Minister: As was the case under the previous Government, the outcome of the talks and any settlement in Northern Ireland will be put to the people of Northern Ireland in a referendum.

There is nothing more destructive of our national life and more corrosive of decent civic values and family life than structural youth and long-term unemployment. Almost one in five households in Britain have no one in work. Across the country, thousands of young people have been let down by the education system and denied training opportunities, and are condemned to long-term unemployment. That is why my right hon. Friend the Chancellor will introduce a Budget in a few weeks' time that offers new hope for those young people on benefit through the windfall tax on the excess profits of the privatised utilities. All young people aged between 18 and 25 who have been unemployed for more than six months will be offered a choice of jobs, training and work experience. That is the way to give those young people some hope and a stake in the country's future. It must be the right way to proceed.

Our welfare-to-work strategy will be only one part of our drive to modernise the welfare state. My party played the pivotal role in founding the welfare state, and it is now our task to make it work for a new age. Let us be clear: we have reached the limits of the public's willingness simply to fund an unreformed welfare system through ever higher taxes and spending. Moreover, we face the prospect—brought home graphically by the previous Government—of rising welfare bills combined with increasing poverty and social division. For example, in 1979 we spent £7 billion on housing investment; today we spend more than £11 billion on housing benefit.

The blunt truth is that the world of 1997 bears little resemblance in work patterns, in industrial production and in social or family life to the world of 1947. Change is inevitable; but that change must be right and fair. We are therefore undertaking a thorough examination of all aspects of welfare reform. The Secretary of State at the Department of Social Security is looking at benefit reform, benefit fraud and help for lone parents; the new Education Minister will consider the recommendations of the Dearing committee in respect of funding for higher education; we are planning a royal commission on community care; and the new Minister of State at the Department of Social Security, the Secretary of State and other Ministers are examining the entire area of welfare reform, including pensions.

Dearest of all in the hearts of the British people is the national health service. It was my party's proudest creation in government, and it is our job to rebuild it.

Mr. Simon Hughes: I congratulate the Prime Minister on his success, and I hope that we shall see a great, and not too cautious, reforming Government. Will he give an undertaking that if, in the course of Ministers' examination of aspects of the welfare state, it becomes clear to them—as it is clear to the public—that it will not

be possible to do all that is necessary to provide the education service that we need and all that is necessary to provide a health service that meets the demands of the people, the Government will consider increasing significantly public resources for those two services? That is what the British public clearly want and what those services clearly need.

The Prime Minister: With all due respect to the hon. Gentleman, the public clearly wanted a Labour Government—which is exactly what they got.

Mr. Hughes: The majority did not.

The Prime Minister: I appreciate that the hon. Gentleman believes that it was his party's addiction to rather peculiar tax-raising powers that secured its electoral support, but I suspect that it was not. We are examining all aspects of welfare reform. In light of the hon. Gentleman's remarks, I hope that he will support strongly our welfare-to-work proposals and the windfall levy when we present them.

On health, we made key election pledges. We said that we would scrap the Conservative internal market. We said that we would cut red tape. We said that we would restore the national health service as a strong, modern public service and cut waiting lists. The Queen's Speech starts to fulfil all of those promises. Savings will go towards treating more patients and cutting waiting lists for cancer treatments.

The Queen's Speech also contains a health Bill that will rescue the private finance initiative from the mire in which the last Government left it, and pave the way for the building of the promised new hospitals. After 18 years of neglect, we will take prevention seriously, as well as cure. I have created a new post of Minister for Public Health, whose job it is to mount a crusade against the killer diseases that unnecessarily claim too many lives. We will start with smoking. The Queen's Speech indicates that we will present shortly a White Paper containing measures to reduce smoking, and a Bill on the banning of tobacco advertising. There is no greater threat to the health of teenagers than that of smoking, and we intend to act upon it.

A modern welfare state and NHS is one part of rebuilding this country as a decent civic society in which every citizen has a stake, but with opportunity should come responsibility. That is the foundation of a strong community. We are giving people chances, but there are basic things we demand in return—law-abiding conduct and an end to anti-social behaviour.

During the election campaign in Gravesham, I met an elderly man—a second world war veteran—who told me he was afraid to go out to the shops because gangs of youngsters harass him. "I fought for this country," he said. "It's not fair, is it?" It is not fair, but we do not pretend that we can alter it overnight. Some of the roots of these problems go very deep—the decline in strong family life being one reason—but we can do something, and we will.

The crime and disorder Bill will introduce fast-track punishment for persistent young offenders and a new final warning in place of endless cautions, and will begin a far-reaching reform of the whole youth justice system. Young offenders will be made to face up to the

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consequences of their offences, and parents will be made responsible for their children's behaviour through parental responsibility orders. In addition, the Government will fulfil our manifesto commitments to establish on a statutory basis local crime prevention partnerships to take action against anti-social neighbours, to legislate for child protection orders covering young children on the streets late at night, and to establish new offences of racial violence and racial harassment.

A central part of our programme will be the decentralisation of power and the granting to our citizens of greater rights to hold government to account. We will incorporate the European convention on human rights into British law, and we are publishing a White Paper on freedom of information legislation. We will devolve power—a Parliament in Scotland, an Assembly in Wales and an elected authority and mayor in London.

Scotland already has different local government. Wales, particularly now that it has moved to unitary local government, could do with a powerful national voice. It makes great sense to replace the bureaucratic devolution through the Scottish and Welsh Offices by giving the people of Scotland and Wales a direct say over their own affairs, while retaining ultimate sovereignty in Westminster. Many Londoners have been crying out for a proper strategic authority for London that can give shape and direction to the government of London.

Mr. Paddy Ashdown (Yeovil): Who?

Mr. Blair: "Who?" If the right hon. Gentleman asked most people in London, he would find that London desperately needs a proper strategic authority.

Each change will, of course, be made with the fully given consent of the people in a referendum.

Mr. Dennis Canavan (Falkirk, West): The late John Smith described the Scottish Parliament as "unfinished business" and "the settled will" of the Scottish people. In view of the fact that the Tories suffered a complete wipe-out in Scotland at the general election, will the Prime Minister take this opportunity to reiterate John's commitment to legislate for a Scottish Parliament? Will he ensure also that the legislation reaches the statute book within this Session? Can he give some indication of the timetable he envisages for the first elections to the Scottish Parliament?

Mr. Blair: That is precisely what is in the Queen's Speech, and it is our intention to legislate for it. We will do so as soon as we possibly can.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): Will the Prime Minister give a firm undertaking that any constitutional measures will be taken in Committee on the Floor of the House?

Mr. Blair: As I have said before to the hon. Gentleman, the referendum Bill will of course be taken on the Floor of the House. Other measures will be discussed by a new Committee on procedures to be established by the Leader of the House. There will be ample time for debate, but I have to say to the hon.

Gentleman and other Opposition Members that if the firmly established will of the Scottish and Welsh people is demonstrated in referendums, the people will not expect us to be game-playing here—they will expect us to legislate.

We will also put concern for the environment at the heart of policy making, so that it is not an add-on extra, but informs the Government. We are taking tough action to set mandatory leakage targets for water companies, and to improve their environmental performance.

We have integrated decision making on transport and local authorities, under the strong lead of my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister, and I will attend the post-Rio summit, at the end of June, on the environment.

We will rebuild Britain's standing in the world, after years of a foreign policy too often dictated by internal fighting in the Government rather than a true assessment of this country's interests. There will be no false choices between the Atlantic and Europe. Our policies will be founded on the twin rocks of the strongest possible transatlantic relationship, embodied above all in NATO, and strong co-operation with our European partners.

At the intergovernmental conference at Amsterdam, I will work for an outcome that equips Europe for the historic task of enlargement—

Sir Michael Spicer (West Worcestershire) *rose*—

Mr. William Cash (Stone) *rose*—

The Prime Minister: I am so delighted that so little has changed. Perhaps I may just complete my sentence—and be allowed what some hon. Members never allowed the previous Prime Minister.

I will work for an outcome that equips Europe for the historic task of enlargement and retains national control in the crucial areas of justice and home affairs, foreign policy and defence.

Sir Michael Spicer: Although I sincerely congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on his new job, will he resign it if at Amsterdam he finds himself having to transfer massive powers from this country to the Government in Brussels?

The Prime Minister: It is a little early to be talking of resignation, but as the hon. Gentleman congratulated me I should like to congratulate him and, indeed, several of his hon. Friends—on the magnificent part that they played in our victory.

Mr. Cash: Will the Prime Minister give way?

The Prime Minister: No, I am sorry.

I will also look for early progress on the issues that I have identified as central to our interests in Europe: rapid completion of the single market, reform of the common agricultural policy and a move to labour markets that can make Europe more globally competitive.

Mr. Cash *rose*—

The Prime Minister: No, thank you.

We will work hard to get a better deal for our fishing industry and to reform the discredited common fisheries policy.

We have, I fear, an appalling inheritance from the previous Government's mishandling of the BSE crisis. We are urgently considering the best way forward to restore the British beef industry and to secure the lifting of the beef ban. We expect that the necessary measures that we will take to restore confidence will meet a sensible and swift response from our European partners.

We will strengthen the vital bond of the Commonwealth, not least through the Heads of Government meeting in Edinburgh later this year, and be a new force for positive change in the developing world. The Department for International Development will focus on the needs of the poorest and most vulnerable right across the globe.

It was always one of the better parts of the politics of the past five years that we worked closely with the previous Government and, indeed, the Leader of the Opposition, on Northern Ireland. I am happy to give praise once again to his efforts to secure peace. I hope and expect that the bipartisan approach that we had then should continue now. I said in the election campaign that Northern Ireland would be as great a priority for me as it was for the previous Prime Minister, and I reaffirm that today.

As right hon. and hon. Members will know, I have already met the main political leaders and talked to the Taoiseach, John Bruton. Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom. My approach will be based on the fundamental principle that there can be no question of any change to that status without the full-hearted consent of the people of Northern Ireland. That is my promise and my guarantee.

I wish to make progress in the multi-party talks due to resume on 3 June. It will be much better if they can proceed in a climate of peace and include all the parties, but that depends on an unequivocal IRA ceasefire demonstrated in word and deed. Sinn Féin must move decisively away from violence and embrace once and for all peaceful methods and the democratic process.

The Queen's Speech contains a crowded and busy legislative programme, but as important as the items of legislation are the values that underpin them—such as fairness. That is why there will be a minimum wage, sensibly set in consultation with business, to remove the worst excesses of poverty pay.

Mr. Fabricant: Will the Prime Minister give way?

The Prime Minister: No.

We want laws that protect the public, which is why we will allow the House a free vote on the banning of all handguns, and pay our debt to the victims of Dunblane.

We want a Government in touch with the people whom they serve; which is why we will introduce a lottery Bill that will direct new funds from the mid-week lottery to the causes in education and health that would not otherwise receive funding through public expenditure. That is long overdue and massively popular: the people's money used for the people's causes.

That is the ambitious but practical programme of a new Labour Government who have their feet on the ground and sound values in their heart: the necessary mixture of idealism and realism that the modern age demands.

The British people do not have false expectations. They simply want a Government with clear leadership, who will start to get the essentials right. We will not put right the damage of 18 years in 18 days, or even in 18 months, but in 12 days we have already shown how we can make a start and make a difference. We have started as we mean to go on: offering leadership and setting the agenda, rather than having it set for us. In short, we are doing the job that we were elected to do: governing for the whole nation.

This is a Queen's Speech of which my Government can be proud. It builds on the hope and optimism that the election set coursing through the veins of our nation. It shows that change can come; it shows a Government rooted firmly in the centre ground, in touch with the people and governing for the people. It reflects the people's priorities. It shows the people's Government rebuilding trust between government and governed.

We said that Britain deserved better. In this Queen's Speech, Britain begins to get better, and I commend it to the House.

4.26 pm

Mr. Paddy Ashdown (Yeovil): Madam Speaker—*[Interruption.]*

Madam Speaker: Order. I ask hon. Members to leave quietly and quickly, because a right hon. Member is waiting to speak.

Mr. Ashdown: I join the Prime Minister and the leader of the Conservative party in paying tribute to the people whom they mentioned who are no longer with us. I also pay tribute to one whom they inadvertently left out. Nicholas Baker was a close neighbour of mine and I shall miss him greatly. I am sure that the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition would join me in that tribute.

I should also like to pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman) and to the hon. Member for Sunderland, South (Mr. Mullin) for their remarkable speeches. The Prime Minister believed that there was only one copy of the right hon. Gentleman's book—I beg pardon. I must get it right, but it is so difficult. The leader of the Conservative party believed that there was only one copy of the right hon. Gentleman's book, and the Prime Minister thought that there were two, but I can reveal that there are three copies in the House of Commons Library. No doubt, the fact that the right hon. Gentleman has been called to propose the Gracious Speech has done wonders for the sales of his book.

I, too, have read the book—no, I have not. My researcher has read it, and has drawn my attention to the right hon. Gentleman's comment about two diseases that strike Cabinet Ministers. The first is called ministerialitis, which occurs when one puts the enjoyment of ministerial office before all other matters. The second is departmentalitis, which occurs when one puts the interest of the Department before all other matters, including those of the Government. We shall be watching for any outbreak of those diseases in the new Government.

The hon. Member for Sunderland, South was once asked why he was in Parliament, and he said that it was to intervene at inconvenient moments to ask embarrassing questions of the Home Secretary. We hope that he will continue to perform that role, because we have a suspicion that it will still be required.

[Mr. Ashdown]

One of the problems about sharing a book with the leader of the Conservative party is that I had prepared the same joke as the right hon. Gentleman—the one about the notice left for the burglar reading, “Dear Burglar, I have been cleaned out: nothing left to take.” I was going to comment that, having looked at the Queen’s Speech and compared it to our manifesto, I knew how that felt, but the right hon. Gentleman got there before us—which perhaps tells us more about the Queen’s Speech than about the notice left for the burglar.

Mr. Mullin: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his kind remarks. For the benefit of historical record, I should make it clear that no such notice ever appeared on my front door, although I was burgled more than 20 times.

Mr. Ashdown: Never mind. It makes a good story, and the truth should never be allowed to spoil a story.

I congratulate the Prime Minister on his election, and on the election of his Government. He has shown remarkable courage and determination in reforming his party, and has won himself a remarkable mandate—probably the strongest mandate held by any Prime Minister, certainly since the war. I believe that he has behind him the good wishes of the nation, and he has mine and those of my party as well. I do not wish to reiterate the arguments of the general election; I think that the moment for that has now passed, and that we ought to look to the future.

A Queen’s Speech is always important, because it sets out the direction that the Government intend to take over the next year. The Queen’s Speech of a new Government is even more important, because it sets out the direction that that Government intend to take over the next five years. I hope, however, that this Queen’s Speech will prove even more important than that: I hope that it marks the start not just of another Government, but of a decade that will bring the change, reform and modernisation that our country needs so badly and for which it has waited so long.

If a generation of progressive change, founded on constitutional and electoral reform, is what the Government intend, the Prime Minister can count on the Liberal Democrats to be critical but firm supporters of every step that he takes along the way. Of course we shall criticise the Government when we believe that they are wrong, and especially when their actions fall short of the programme of reform that the country needs. I have to say that there are some rather worrying examples of that in the programme with which they have presented us today. Our aim, however, will be to provide a constructive opposition, and if that breaks the outmoded convention that Oppositions must always oppose, whatever the merits of the case, we make no apologies for it.

After our most successful election campaign for 60 or 70 years, the Liberal Democrats now come to the House with a clear and powerful mandate. It is a mandate to fight for more investment in education; to ensure that the health service is protected and improved; to argue for practical, effective action to prevent crime; to put the environment at the heart of Government policies—that is one of the deficiencies of the Queen’s Speech—to work for

constitutional reform and democratic renewal; and for a rather more rational, more honest and less adversarial style of politics.

If, as the Prime Minister has promised, this is to be a more open and inclusive kind of Government, we shall respond by being a more co-operative and constructive Opposition. If, as the Government imply, they want our politics to be less fussy and less formal, they will find us ready partners in that as well. This place, too, has become far too out of date and far too out of touch for our country’s needs. Making the House more open, more approachable and more human is part of the vital task of creating a different culture for our politics as we enter the new century, so that we can start to recover the trust that politics and politicians have so obviously lost over recent years.

I hope that the Queen’s Speech will be an historic one, marking not just a change of nameplate on No. 10 but a change of direction for the whole country. I hope that it marks the beginning of a process of reform, not only of our constitution and the culture of our politics but of our society and the education and welfare systems that underpin it, our relations with our neighbours in Europe, our approach to the environment and the way in which we run our economy. In their early days, the Government have made a good start. It is not to diminish the importance of that if one comments that that was the easy bit. The real task begins today with the Queen’s Speech.

Britain now faces six key challenges. The first is to re-equip our people with the education and skills that are necessary for individual and national success. The second is to reform our system of government to rebuild trust in our politics and to give people more control over their lives. The third is to renew our sense of common purpose in society, based on self-reliance, shared responsibility and strong and efficient public services. The fourth is to reassess our relationship with the environment in which we live and the fifth is to rebuild Britain’s economic strength by putting long-term investment before short-term consumption. The sixth is to rediscover our national self-confidence in our attitudes to Europe and to the wider world.

The Government’s programme, presented to us today, begins to address some of those issues. For that reason, we give it now—as I hope that we shall be able to give it on Tuesday—a broad, if cautious, welcome. Indeed, it would be hard not to welcome a Queen’s Speech with so many measures that first saw the light of day in Liberal Democrat policy papers. The measures include incorporation of the European convention on human rights—but what do the Government mean by saying, “Just the main provisions”?—the general teaching council for teachers, the independent food standards agency, a statutory right to interest on late payment of debt, independence for the Bank of England—the list goes on. It is said that the Government are enacting their manifesto. It feels more like they are enacting ours. However, other issues, such as the environment, should feature more strongly in the programme, but are ignored either wholly or in part.

There are some issues, notably education, where the intentions are good but, in our view, meaningless, unless they are matched by the resources to make them a reality in the classroom. Even the Government’s modest aspirations for cutting school class sizes for children between the ages of five and seven cannot, in our view,

be paid for with the money that has been allocated to them from winding up the assisted places scheme. The sums, we believe, simply do not add up.

Why, incidentally, do we limit ourselves to reducing class sizes to 30 only for children aged between five and seven? The Government have tied their hands by refusing to consider funding education from a rise in income tax. The result is that schools next year will, I greatly fear, continue to be underfunded, teachers will continue to be sacked and children between the ages of seven and 11 will continue to be in class sizes of more than 30 as we come to the end of the century. That is just not good enough for a Government who tell us that education is their No. 1 priority. If they will the ends, they must will the means.

On some other issues, especially on constitutional reform, the judgments and priorities in the Queen's Speech seem—how shall I put it?—at best a little unclear. An example is the second question on the referendum on a Scottish Parliament. If, as the Prime Minister himself famously said, the people of every English parish council have the right to raise taxes, what is the purpose of asking whether the Scottish people should have the right to do the same?

Similarly, the Labour Party agreed before the election, that a fair, proportional electoral system for the 1999 European elections was both—I think I have the right words—their "policy and intention". The timetable for that, if it is to be seriously delivered, will be very tight if it is not done in the coming year. We shall press the Government on their intentions on that and, in particular, on whether they recognise that a fair voting system for the 1999 European elections will require speedy, indeed almost immediate, changes to the work being done by the boundary commission.

I hope, too, that there will be early progress on setting up the commission on electoral reform that has been agreed between our two parties and that was specifically promised in the Labour manifesto. I am pretty confident that that will happen, but it needs to get under way very quickly.

Although we understand the pressure on this year's legislative programme, a White Paper on freedom of information will—I say gently, given Labour's past record on this—be much more convincing as a statement of intent if it is accompanied by a firm timetable for action. It should not be deemed something that we can delay. Whatever their good intentions, the longer newly appointed ministers have to become habituated to the drug of Whitehall secrecy, the harder they will find it to kick the habit. The Government ought to be giving Whitehall a spell of cold turkey to get off that drug. I hope that the delay does not mean that they are getting a touch of cold feet instead.

The lack of clarity is disappointing in a Queen's Speech that, elsewhere, has much to commend it and that contains other sensible and welcome proposals, which we shall support. The right of small businesses to interest on the late payment of debt is long overdue. However, if small businesses are to succeed and grow, there is much more that a Government can do to help them, such as giving them ready access to equity funds.

We welcome an independent food standards agency but, if it is to be genuinely independent, it should be accountable not to Ministers, but to Parliament.

Fast-track treatment for young offenders is fine in principle, but not if it just ends up speeding up an already flawed system.

We are in favour of action to tackle workplace exploitation and poverty wages. However, in order to enhance jobs rather than destroy them, a minimum wage must be sensible and, above all, flexible to reflect regional variations.

We agree that there are savings to be made in NHS bureaucracy, but the Government are kidding themselves if they think that those savings can fund the health service, let alone the improvements that we believe that the British people want from that service.

We welcome, in principle, any programme that helps people off welfare and into work. I must tell the Prime Minister, who put the question to my hon. Friend the Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes), that, in our view, it is just plain wrong to fund that from a one-off, retrospective tax that will, in the long term, inevitably disproportionately hit consumers, shareholders and probably pensioners.

We want to see the profits of the lottery spread more fairly, but core funding for health and education should not be paid for out of the profits of gambling because we have become so frightened of paying for them out of general taxation.

It was obvious to us that interest rates would have to go up after the election, however much the Chancellor and his then shadow denied it. The rise made by the new Chancellor will probably prove too small and may have to be followed by another. However, that depends on how tight a Budget the Chancellor intends to introduce.

We are glad, and think it is wise, that there will be an early Budget. As we said during the general election, heat will have to be taken out of the economy quickly. The fact that that was not done under the previous Government means that we shall now have to take stronger action than would otherwise have been necessary.

We believe that it would be far better for that to be done through taxation, rather than interest rates, which will damage business and push up the pound. Whatever he said to the contrary during the election campaign, I suspect that the new Chancellor believes that too. If we tighten our belts now, we have a real opportunity to get to grips with the huge hangover of debt left behind by the Conservatives.

The tax cuts, unopposed by Labour and given away in last year's Budget, will now have to be restored, just as we said they would, and just as both other parties promised they would not. As a result of the ridiculous, illogical, almost psychotic aversion that has now built up in our politics, the one tax that the Chancellor cannot and will not use is the most efficient, the most progressive and the fairest—income tax. That is ludicrous. For that reason, the Chancellor must hunt around for other means. Speculation today is that he will tax more efficient communications. I see no principled objection to that, but what is the logic for it when more efficient communications are vital to a modern and efficient country and its technology-based economy?

We must get back to a more rational, logical and reasonable debate about tax. The Prime Minister may, uncharacteristically, have misunderstood or not heard one of the election messages—that seemed to be the case in

[Mr. Ashdown]

his answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey. I genuinely believe—all the opinion polls show it—that the one policy best known and most widely supported during the election was our proposal for 1p on income tax for education. It is a misjudgment if the Prime Minister and the Labour party do not understand that. If we continue to duck the issue of taxation, we shall never rebuild trust in British politics.

If the Government's tax policies are probably unsupportable, their spending plans on education and health are, at this stage, plainly unsustainable. If that remains unchanged, whatever tinkering the Government may do—or more than tinkering, to be fair—over the next year, our schools and hospitals will sink deeper into crisis. We said that when the spending plans were proposed by the last Government in their Budget and we said it throughout the election. Sooner or later, we believe that the Government will be saying it too. It is a problem that the Government cannot duck, and it will come at them very soon and very fast.

Liberal Democrats have come to the House doubled in numbers and with a clear mandate to fight for increased investment in education, for more resources for the health service, for a new recognition of the importance of the environment and for political reform and the modernisation of our institutions in Britain. We shall use that new strength to fight for the policies that we believe Britain needs. We believe that we share with the Government the mandate for change for which the British people voted 13 days ago. That means changing not just what the Government do and how they do it, but what the Opposition do as well. Where the Government are wrong, we shall oppose them strenuously, but where we believe that they are right, we shall support and assist them.

Where convention stands in the way of doing that, we shall be happy to see those conventions changed to improve the way we do things, both in the House and outside. That is why we welcome the Prime Minister's proposals to change Prime Minister's Questions to make them more constructive and beneficial to the House. If there are other ways in which we can sensibly change the way we do things, let us do so. That could include, for example, changes to the constitution or the essential reform of our antiquated and inadequate welfare system, which the Prime Minister mentioned in his speech.

I hope that this will be the historic opening of a historic Parliament of change. We believe that the Liberal Democrats are part of the force that won that mandate for change in the election. We now have the strength to play a real part in the modernisation of our country and we intend to do exactly that.

4.47 pm

Mr. Giles Radice (North Durham): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman) on his characteristically brilliant and witty speech. He and I worked closely together in the dark days of the early 1980s in the Labour party. I salute him for his courage and determination over many years, and for his contribution to the House of Commons.

My hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland, South (Mr. Mullin) is a valued colleague in the northern region, and I and all hon. Members respect him for his campaigns against miscarriages of justice. I congratulate him on his witty speech.

I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister on his brilliant performance during the general election, on his smashing electoral success and on the start made by his Government.

I congratulate the right hon. Member for Yeovil (Mr. Ashdown) on his successful election campaign. I agree that it was the same sort of voters and for possibly the same motives who voted in his Members of Parliament as voted in ours. I look forward to the Liberal Democrats making a positive and constructive contribution to this Parliament. If they think that what we are doing is sensible, I hope that they will back it in the Division Lobby. I hope that that is what they will do on the Queen's Speech.

It is extremely moving for me, after 18 years on the Opposition Benches, to be on the Government Benches, among so many hon. Friends and so many women Members.

Mrs. Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley): Hear, hear.

Mr. Radice: Quite right. Perhaps Conservative Members, judging by their performance today, have not yet become accustomed to being in opposition. They will, although it takes some getting used to. Perhaps they should not spend 18 years, as we did, on the Opposition Benches, but their start has not been very encouraging.

At last week's historic meeting at Church house, the Prime Minister rightly told us not to be triumphant. He said that we are the servants, not the masters, and that we will have to justify the trust that the British people have placed in us. By winning 13.5 million votes—44.5 per cent. of the total British electorate—however, Labour had an electoral triumph. The most important aspect is that, with Labour Members elected from every part of Britain, we justified our claim to be the one-nation party.

As a northern Member, I am particularly delighted that there are so many Labour Members from southern Britain. As hon. Members are boasting about what they have written, I think that I should be able to get in on the act.

In 1992, shortly after our defeat, I wrote a Fabian pamphlet entitled "Southern Discomfort", in which I argued that Labour had to win more seats in the south if we were ever again to form a Government. My pamphlet was based on a survey of the attitudes of swing voters—which we now call switchers—in southern marginal constituencies.

I discovered that, in 1992, although those voters disliked the Conservatives, they distrusted the Labour party even more. I therefore concluded:

"If we are to achieve a Labour victory at the next election we have to be prepared to adopt a new identity which is in tune with the times. In short, we have to become a new Labour party."

As everyone knows, under the Prime Minister's leadership, we became new Labour, and, on 1 May, we won a famous victory. We made gains in every part of Britain, although none were so striking as those in the south-east. In 1992, Labour held only three seats in the south-east outside London. Today, we hold 31 seats, including eight in Kent, six in Essex, five in Hertfordshire and four in East Sussex. Once again, the Labour party can say that it is a national party.

I congratulate the Government on their tremendous start, and should tell them that the Queen's Speech is very impressive. During the election, smart broadsheet

newspaper columnists wrote that electing the Labour party would make no difference, but the Queen's Speech has answered that sentiment. It contains comprehensive and radical measures that will make a real difference to my constituents in North Durham.

I am thinking particularly of the welfare-to-work programme and of the education measures, especially those to cut class sizes—[*Interruption.*] I tell the right hon. Member for Yeovil (Mr. Ashdown) not to knock the measures, because they are extremely important for my constituents.

Mr. Ashdown: The measures have to be paid for.

Mr. Radice: We have shown how we can pay for them, and we will see what happens.

Mr. Fabricant: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Radice: Yes. What is the hon. Gentleman's constituency—I wonder if he can tell me?

Mr. Fabricant: The hon. Gentleman mentioned reduction in class sizes. Has he analysed the cost of forcing the 38,000 pupils who are currently educated in the private education system into the state education system? They will be forced into the state system if the assisted places scheme is abolished.

Mr. Radice: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on being re-elected by the skin of his teeth.

Mr. Menzies Campbell (North-East Fife): By a hair's breadth.

Mr. Radice: Yes.

The hon. Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant) is not up to speed on the details of Labour's policy, which will be phased in. Those who are already in the private system will be able to complete their education.

Improvements to the national health service also will help my constituents, as will the anti-crime proposals, which are so needed.

I should like to mention three other matters, the first of which is the Bank of England. I strongly support a Bill to give the Bank of England operational independence. The action is a bold move—which was certainly foreshadowed for anyone who read our manifesto—and will do much to reinforce economic stability. It will also align the United Kingdom with other western democracies. Moreover, the action is supported by two former Conservative Chancellors of the Exchequer, and is based on the report of the previous Parliament's Treasury Select Committee—of which I was a member, although Conservative Members formed the majority.

I think that allowing the Bank of England operational independence will improve control of inflation, because countries with independent central banks tend to do better on inflation. It will provide long-term protection and perspective to the Government, and it will give them to time to develop and implement their policies. I also believe that the proposals will enhance rather than lessen accountability. The Chancellor will continue to set an inflation target; a monetary committee will be established

which will work within the Government's guidelines; the Committee's minutes will be published; and the Committee will report to the Treasury Select Committee.

I remember a former Chancellor of the Exchequer, Nigel Lawson, who appeared before the Treasury Select Committee. When we asked him about interest rates, he said that, when he wanted to raise interest rates, he raised them, and when he wanted to lower them, he lowered them. That was all he had to say about the matter. I therefore believe that accountability will be increased by the Government's measures.

I welcome the aspects of the Queen's Speech dealing with relations with the European Union. The general election campaign was fought in a nauseating atmosphere of Europhobia—which was not helped by the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood). The language about Britain's relations with the EU became more hysterical the longer the campaign went on. The *Daily Mail* wrote about fighting "the Battle of Britain", and *The Times*—the old thunderer—advised its readers to vote for Euro-sceptics and against Euro-enthusiasts, although it did not have much success in that recommendation.

The Conservative party produced a widely condemned poster of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister sitting on the knee of Chancellor Kohl. The Prime Minister is well able to take care of himself, as he proved during the general election campaign, when he was subjected to consistent, mostly personal, attacks by Conservative Members. That poster was a disgraceful way in which to treat an ally and partner, and we should wholeheartedly condemn it. Now that the general election is over, however, we have a real opportunity to establish a more positive relationship with the European Union.

The general election has established that Euro-scepticism was a far weaker force than its advocates claimed. The Labour and Liberal tide was no respecter of Euro-sceptics. The figures show that, of the more than 20 swings above 15 per cent. against Tory candidates, only three went against Euro-enthusiasts; the remainder went against Euro-sceptics. So much for the protective power of a commitment against a single currency. Almost all the Referendum party candidates lost their deposits, and pro-European views did not make any appreciable difference to the number of votes received by winning candidates.

I was targeted by the Referendum party under the slogan, which it published in the local newspaper: "a vote for Giles Radice is a vote for Brussels".

Two days before polling day, *The Times* urged people in my constituency to vote against me. What was the result? I had a majority of more than 26,000, with a swing of more than 10 per cent. to the Labour party. That was a very good result in a safe Labour seat, and most other pro-European candidates had similar swings.

Above all, the election result has produced a Parliament with a massive pro-European majority. At least two thirds of Members can be counted as pro-European, so the new Government, unlike their predecessor, are able to conduct their European policy without constantly needing to look over their shoulder. They need not bother about the Conservative Euro-sceptics who held the previous Parliament to ransom.

The Government have made a promising start; I salute them for that. The Foreign Secretary has visited France and Germany. The Minister of State, Foreign and

[Mr. Radice]

Commonwealth Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne, North (Mr. Henderson), who has ministerial responsibility for Europe, said in Brussels that Britain would sign up to the social chapter. The Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food has adopted a sensible approach to the BSE crisis.

I want to mention parliamentary reform.

Dr. Norman A. Godman (Greenock and Inverclyde): Some of us who are much friendlier to the European Union than some Opposition Members have serious criticisms to voice, one of which concerns the common fisheries policy, which threatens the livelihood of many of our fishermen, especially in remoter communities in Scotland. Does my hon. Friend agree that the announcement by the Prime Minister that something will be done about the common fisheries policy was welcome?

Mr. Radice: Yes. It is good to have a sensible Government, who are not posturing on the issue for electoral purposes; there was some such posturing during the general election campaign.

I welcome the commitment in the Gracious Speech to parliamentary reform. Parliamentary reform goes in waves; I was part of the previous wave, in the Parliaments of the 1970s. In 1977–78, the Procedure Committee, of which I was a member, recommended the setting up of departmental Select Committees. The recommendation was implemented—I give them credit for that—by the first Thatcher Government. The present intake of many outstanding young Members of Parliament, including some exceptional women, gives us a wonderful opportunity to strengthen the role of Parliament and overhaul its workings.

There is a reform agenda: get the Select Committees up and running, give them more powers and responsibilities, and ensure that their reports are debated and that the Government actually take notice of their findings. The legislative process should be made more meaningful. In that regard, the Special Standing Committee procedure of taking evidence before the Committee stage of Bills, or indeed before their passage, would be very useful.

Our European scrutiny is still not effective; it should be better. We need more parliamentary time for Back-Bench initiative, and we need a more up-to-date and professional Parliament, equipped to do the job of making the Executive accountable in a modern age.

Mr. Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green): If the hon. Gentleman wants to give Select Committees more responsibilities, will he urge not just his Back-Bench colleagues but Ministers to accept that every departmental Select Committee should shadow Britain's representatives going to Europe, and scrutinise what each Department head does when he or she goes to Europe?

Mr. Radice: I agree that Ministers must be more accountable to Select Committees on European matters. There is not enough accountability, so I agree with the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip–Northwood): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Radice: No.

Mr. Wilkinson: The hon. Gentleman has raised some important issues, and I want to comment on them.

Mr. Radice: I am sorry; other Members want to speak, and I want to give them time. I am just concluding.

I believe that the new Labour Government will be a great reforming Government, and I hope that one of its achievements will be a comprehensive reform of Parliament.

Several hon. Members rose—

Dr. Godman: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Have you been advised by Madam Speaker to introduce a 10-minute limit on speeches after 6 o'clock?

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): I have received no such instructions. It is a matter that must be determined at the beginning of business, so it will not apply today.

5.4 pm

Mr. John Redwood (Wokingham): Mr. Deputy Speaker, I congratulate you on your new office. I congratulate the new Government and Prime Minister on their election victory. I join in expressing the shared sorrow at the loss of former colleagues who have died in recent weeks; and I add to that my sense of loss and sadness that so many fine Conservative colleagues were defeated in the general election. We shall sorely miss their counsel and their debating skills. The nation will miss them. I hope that their absence will be temporary, and that we shall see them back ere long, when opportunity presents.

I want to express my gratitude to the electors of Wokingham. It was extremely reassuring on that awful night, only a few days ago, to be shown that I still had the trust of slightly more than half of my electors. I am very conscious that almost another half did not vote for me; I will represent their views as strongly as those of the half who did support me that night.

Like many colleagues and Members of the House, I have been listening carefully for months and years, and especially intensively in recent days and weeks, to the views of my electors. Only one in six of Wokingham electors bought the idea of new Labour, so I can speak with authority when I say that there are still many people in my constituency and throughout the country who need to be persuaded that the new Government will be new, that it will pursue the interests of the country, and that it will make Britain better.

My electors said that they wanted better schools and higher educational standards. During the general election campaign, many told me that they agreed with the Opposition parties that more money in the classrooms would help. I asked them why a Liberal-Labour county council had failed to pass the money on to schools. I worked with Conservative candidates for the local council to offer the electors a better deal for schools, and I am delighted to say that, as a result, the council candidates for the Conservative cause swept to victory in the new Wokingham unitary authority elections, promising the extra money. They will deliver on that promise.

I want to ask the leader of the Liberal party, who is unfortunately away from his place, "What is stopping Liberal councillors throughout the country offering that money now, today, to those schools?" They say so much about it; why cannot they back their words with the cheque book they control in so many local authorities?

My constituents said that, although they accepted that we had done much to pay for better health care and to expand the national health service, they would like it to be better still. Labour, Liberal and Conservative are united in saying, "We want a progressively better health service."

I shall watch carefully to discover whether Labour Ministers, devoid of extra money, can produce a better answer than the good answer that my right hon. and hon. Friends produced in recent years. They will find it difficult to switch the money from management to health care in the way they have suggested. I notice that their only ambition is to switch £100 million—a single day's spending in the great health service budget. There is no way in which our health service will be transformed by a day's additional money; it will need far more than that, and the Labour Government must ask where that money will come from and how they can run the service better.

I warn the Government that, if they try to unscramble all our reforms, many of which did considerable good, they will discover that that is expensive and unhelpful. Far from reducing managerial costs, they will discover that they have incurred more in unscrambling something that already works quite well.

The new Government's style is fascinating—the fixation with media appearances and with control of the spoken and written word of any Minister or Back-Bench Member who thinks that they might like to express a view. So far, they have been a Government of photo opportunities. I compliment them: some of their photo opportunities have been well judged—they looked good in the newspapers—but what a chapter of accidents we have had in the first few hectic days of the Administration. One Minister resigned in less than four days. That must be a record for the removal of a man from office in a new Administration. Another hon. Member was offered a job, and nine seconds later he lost it because the Government discovered that they had got the names muddled up and had made the offer to the wrong man.

Showing bold leadership, the Prime Minister decided to bring in a captain of industry—I trust that he was not one of the fat cats they had previously excoriated—to be Minister for Europe. He then discovered that his Foreign Secretary did not agree, so he back-pedalled, saying that the man would not be the proper Minister for Europe after all. The Foreign Secretary relaxed. A day later, we discovered that there was to be an alternative Minister for Europe, and that the gentleman from industry would go to the House of Lords and shadow the real Minister for Europe, to offer us two different versions on different days of the week.

It will be good to have two Ministers for Europe. On his first expedition to Brussels, the first one discovered that he could not put the microphone on, so his voice could not be heard in the important debates. What a symbol of new Labour in Brussels! They were not even heard, because they did not know how to work the microphone. It was a glimpse, in microcosm, of what will happen to the Government as they discover that smiling and being pleasant to our partners in Europe will not bring home the answers that we so desperately need.

Where is the better deal for our fishermen? There is no sign of it. Where is the lifting of the beef ban that the Labour party hinted at and promised before the election?

There is no sign of it. The two Ministers for Europe will be competing with each other, with different views of European issues, but they will not be heard, because they will be acting under instructions that control them too greatly.

The rift on Europe will go much higher than the contest between the two Ministers of State, interesting though it will be for us to follow their progress and their battles. The real rift on Europe in the new Labour Government is between the Chancellor and the Foreign Secretary. How wise of the Prime Minister to do a balancing act. He chooses on the one hand a Euro-sceptic Foreign Secretary and on the other a Euro-friendly Chancellor of the Exchequer, and leaves them to fight it out. I am sure that, in his usual way, one day he will be Euro-sceptic and the next he will be Euro-friendly, depending on the balance of forces in the Cabinet for the time being.

We have seen the Prime Minister at work with his ties. He has a good line in ties. Some days, when he is going to address business audiences, audiences in the south of England or audiences where Conservatives have been let in by mistake, he sports a good range of blue ties. On other days, when he is going to audiences who think that socialism should be mentioned, at least in private between consenting adults, he sports a good line in red ties. In masterly fashion, at the end of the election campaign he blended the two into royal purple before ascending the throne. He will find it considerably more difficult to blend the views of the right hon. Members for Dunfermline, East (Mr. Brown) and for Livingston (Mr. Cook). We shall see many more disputes and scraps between those two ere we have a European policy that can work.

Conservative Members will take a great interest in the Minister without Portfolio, aptly named in the press the "Minister for meddling". He will sum up a meddling Government, meddling incessantly, and trying to orchestrate everything that is said, and quite a few of the things that are done, by the new Administration. I am sure that he will upset Labour Members all too often, because they will come to resent the undue power and influence that he, a rather junior Minister, has against that of his Cabinet colleagues and betters. We shall watch carefully.

I enjoyed the deft touch that the Minister without Portfolio showed by banning the ministerial lunch for journalists. The unattributable briefing over lunch is one of the important highlights of the British constitution. It encapsulates our freedoms. How can the press and public know what is going on behind closed doors in the secrecy of Whitehall unless a Minister can go to lunch and brief journalists to get his side of the story across?

Journalists will come to resent the banning of the ministerial lunch. I look forward to Ministers nipping out for unattributable briefings over tea. The Government may be able to ban lunch, but we shall undoubtedly find that they cannot ban tea or dinner or drinks or walks round the park or meetings in a chosen pub in a nearby constituency. That is bound to happen.

We shall also keep a careful watch on the difficulties that the right hon. Lady allegedly in charge of the Department of Social Security will have with her rather over-mighty subject, her Minister of State. I enjoyed reading the press comments that the Minister of State spent half an hour arguing with the Prime Minister, saying that, because he was the brains behind welfare reform and the man who could capture the media and gain the attention of the public, he ought to be the boss.

[Mr. John Redwood]

I look forward to seeing the right hon. Lady trying to exert her discipline over the Minister of State. The battle of Peckham and the battle of Birkenhead will mean that we shall have little progress on welfare reform, but a great deal to keep us amused on the Opposition Benches.

There are already some serious problems in the Government's approach to their task. Together with many of my right hon. and hon. Friends, I object to the systematic attack on democracy that the Government have already unleashed. We have seen it from the Chancellor, who said just a few days after gaining that important office that he would give half his job away. After 18 years of struggle to have a Labour Chancellor of the Exchequer, they gave half the job away in less than 18 days, because the task was too much for them.

Conservative Members will hold the Chancellor of the Exchequer responsible and accountable for what the Governor of the Bank of England and his monetary committee do. We believe that interest rates are one of the most important ways of controlling the economy, and we shall regard the Chancellor as having the ultimate responsibility for making the right judgments. The Government cannot give away so much democratic power and expect to get away with it. The House will consider the Chancellor the man who has to answer.

The Foreign Secretary, who is usually more reticent about surrendering powers to Brussels, has been equally busy undermining the democratic rights of the House and the British nation. He is one of the architects of the signing of the social chapter.

As my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition said so well today, if the Labour Government want to change our social and employment laws, why do they not bring measures forward to the House in the usual way? I predict that, with their majority, they might even get such measures through, but we want the right to debate them, and we want the British people to have the right to amend them, improve them or repeal them if they do not work.

The Prime Minister must accept that some of the measures that will come forward may be against Britain's interests. He and his Ministers may try to vote them down. They may destroy jobs for young people in the constituencies of Labour Members, but the Government will have given away the right to do anything about it. We shall hold them accountable for that gross mistake.

When I saw the Foreign Secretary's television launch of his new mission statement—an unusual thing for a Foreign Secretary to launch—I wondered whether the sum of his ambition was to turn the fine Locarno room of the Foreign Office into a Fred Karno cinema. It was a terrible sight. I hope that the Foreign Secretary will rise to the dignity of his office, rather than undermining the grand architecture and the important status that a Foreign Secretary should enjoy.

I noticed the Prime Minister moving quickly today to try to cover up the Foreign Secretary's mistake in leaving out of his mission statement any mention of the United States of America and NATO. How can anyone hold that high office for our great country and not understand the importance of the American alliance? How can anyone understand this country and not realise that the defence of

our freedom rests on NATO? I am delighted that the Prime Minister has learnt about that after reading it in the newspapers, but I wish that the Foreign Secretary would come to the House of Commons to make a statement—this time getting it right—showing that he understands the importance of NATO and the American friendship.

The Prime Minister has been busily trying to undermine our democracy. I read reports of his remarks to Labour Members assembled in a building near this Palace only recently. He is alleged to have said that their duty is not to represent their constituents' worries and grievances to the Government, but to represent new Labour to the nation. I trust that that was a mistaken report, but it seemed to fit with the images that were coming across—the celebrations, and the idea that new Labour had all the answers and was now going to govern in a new and more controlled way.

All Members of this House must understand that we are here to perform our duties first and foremost for our constituents. It is the obligation of all new Labour Members to represent the views of their constituents to this House and to the Government they support. We will make sure that they do so, although we hope that they will do so of their own accord.

My right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition was right to challenge the Prime Minister over Prime Minister's Question Time. The only defence for the changes coming from the Government is that there will still be half an hour in which to cross-examine the Prime Minister in a normal working week, as there was before. That argument misses out some of the most important characteristics of the changes.

The first problem is that the Leader of the Opposition will be able to ask the Prime Minister a maximum of only three questions a week rather than six. Successive Conservative Prime Ministers have given the Leader of the Opposition the courtesy of being able to ask three questions on Tuesday and three questions on Thursday. We have had big majorities and we could have stopped that happening, but we are democrats, and we believe that the Opposition have the right to ask questions and to hold the Prime Minister to account. Why is this Prime Minister running away from that accountability even before he has stepped fully into the job?

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby): There is no denying the large majority on the Labour Benches, and I support the current electoral system. Is it not the case, however, that, since the Labour Government got fewer votes than we had in 1992, they should be wary of saying that they have a mandate to change this country in all sorts of ways? They have no such mandate—or, if they have, we had a greater mandate in 1992.

Mr. Redwood: My hon. Friend is right to say that all democrats in the House must understand what the electorate were saying.

The electorate were, of course, criticising us, and we must learn from their criticisms. The electorate were saying to Labour, "We will give you a trial. If you make our schools better, if you make our hospitals better, and if you continue the economic recovery that the Conservatives generated, we shall applaud what you do." That is conditional approval even for a party with such a majority. In addition, as my hon. Friend the Member for

Blaby (Mr. Robathan) rightly said, the overall number of votes cast was below the level we achieved in 1992, with a much smaller majority.

The Prime Minister's other proposed reform for Prime Minister's questions, as I understand it, is to make Back Benchers table in advance the general subjects of their questions, in order to narrow the scope for cross-examination. It is not always possible to know what crisis will blow up or what will be the issue of the moment when we get to Prime Minister's Question Time. It is far better, on the Tuesday or the Thursday, to have open questions, so that Members of Parliament can ask the supplementary on any issue that matters.

The public have a right to see the chief executive of the nation—the Prime Minister, the leader of the Government—under close cross-examination at least twice a week, and we have the right to ask about anything that is of public interest. Madam Speaker will keep us in order; she will make sure that we ask only about things that fall within the responsibility of the Government. I ask again why the Prime Minister wants to run away from accepting responsibility, facing the questions and allowing us and Labour Back Benchers to ask about things that are topical and which clearly matter.

A lot has been made by Labour Members in our discussions on the Queen's Speech about the money that will be freed by the rather bitter measure to abolish assisted places. We are glad that assisted places are paid for out of taxpayers' money, thus giving children from low-income families or from modest backgrounds the chance to go to an excellent school. Labour will create a worse kind of apartheid in this country, because children from low-income families will have no chance to go to a fee-paying school.

The Government will not succeed in lowering class sizes dramatically across the rest of the country as a result of that mean-spirited measure. As the Leader of the Opposition has already pointed out, a great deal of the money that is saved on assisted places will have to be spent on providing spaces for those self-same children in the schools to which they will go instead. The proposal is bogus, and it will undoubtedly backfire.

I say to Labour, as I said to the right hon. Member for Yeovil (Mr. Ashdown) a few minutes ago, that a large amount of money is already available in the budgets of the county councils and other education authorities. Labour councils are blocking that money from going into schools. That is where the money is needed, and that is the problem that the Prime Minister should be tackling in his policies.

I find it surprising that the Prime Minister, having refused to answer me and others over the past two years when we have raised points about the wrongdoing and bad practices of so many Labour authorities, is now turning against them. He intends to use Conservative legislation to intervene in schools that Labour councils have failed to run well. I am glad that he has at last got there, but I believe that it is a great pity that he did not support our legislation to the full when we introduced it. It is a great pity that he and his colleagues in councils around the country have wasted two years when they could have tackled the problems, dealt with the bad teaching, got on with the job, and spared some more children a poor education.

The Government's proposals in the Queen's Speech and the forthcoming Finance Bill are equally unwelcome to us and to many voters. I did not find enthusiasm even among Labour voters for a utilities tax. People know that, in the end, the customer has to pay, and they know that the customers who find the water bill, the gas bill and the electricity bill the most difficult to afford are those on low incomes, those who spend most of their time at home, and pensioners—those who need the utilities' products more than the rest. It is a disgrace that a Labour Government can propose such a mean measure, which will attack the weakest and poorest in society, while not seeming to be aware of what it will do to all those people.

There are now rumours in the press that mortgage interest relief will be abolished just to make sure that home owners, who are already smarting under the first Labour interest rate increase, will have even less tax back to help them to meet their mortgage payments. I do not remember new Labour telling the electorate before the election that there would be a double whammy of that kind on home owners. Conservatives must speak out against the abolition of mortgage interest relief if the Government make such a proposal in the forthcoming Budget.

The Labour party has proposed some referendums, which are very welcome. I relish the prospect of helping to fight devolution through the ballot box in the campaigns leading up to the referendums in Scotland and Wales. It is likely that the Welsh people will decide, as they did in the 1970s, that they do not like Labour's proposals.

Mr. Barry Jones (Alyn and Deeside): Will the right hon. Gentleman tell us how many Conservative Members of Parliament there are in Wales?

Mr. Redwood: I hope that the hon. Gentleman is well informed; I do not think that he really needs an answer to his question. I can tell him, however, that, in the 1970s, there were many Labour Members of Parliament in Wales. The Labour-Liberal Administration at the time proposed a form of devolution for Wales which was remarkably similar to the one that is in the Queen's Speech. It was voted down by a majority of 4:1 in the Welsh referendum. We have a good chance in the forthcoming Welsh referendum, and I look forward to it.

In the campaign leading to the Scottish referendum, we have a good chance of persuading the Scottish people that they do not want a Parliament with tax-raising powers; we shall return to that matter in due course.

Mr. Frank Cook (Stockton, North): If the right hon. Gentleman thinks that it is reasonable for English Members of Parliament to intervene in the devolution proposals for Scotland and for Wales, is he suggesting that any referendum that takes place on those issues should take place over the whole of the United Kingdom rather than just in those principalities?

Mr. Redwood: The hon. Gentleman is way out of line with the Government's proposals. We wish—

Mr. Cook: I asked a question.

Mr. Redwood: I am about to answer the question.

[Mr. Redwood]

We wish to have the widest possible referendum. We certainly have strong views on what should be adjudged a victory. It is most important that the Welsh and Scottish referendums should require not a simple majority of those voting but a simple majority of those eligible to vote. Those who seek a dramatic constitutional change should have to show that there is a real appetite for such a change.

Hon. Members who told me a moment ago that we had no chance of winning the referendum are now saying that they could not possibly accept a referendum that required even 50 per cent. of the electorate to vote in favour. What is so wrong with demanding that? Why are right hon. and hon. Gentlemen so afraid of their own case that they immediately say that they could not possibly accept the idea of half the electorate having to agree?

Mr. Wilkinson: Would my right hon. Friend extend his admirable principle of the necessity for a qualified majority to the referendum on London's government? As a London Member, in the recent general election campaign I encountered not a single voter at a public meeting or on the doorstep who expressed any wish whatsoever for a directly elected assembly for London.

Mr. Redwood: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for making a positive suggestion that we shall need to debate if and when similar legislation is produced for London.

I should like the Labour Government to take their passion for referendums just a little further. It is likely that the new Labour Government will surrender more powers to the Brussels institutions. It seems that they are about to make the mistake of surrendering our national veto over regional, industrial and environmental policy. They will undoubtedly surrender our veto over matters of social and employment law.

That, too, should be put to the British people. If the Government are proud of that transfer of power, surely it would give them great pleasure to prove us wrong and show that the British people want the powers to be transferred. I do not believe that, and I should like to take the case to the British people.

Mr. Radice: I do not know whether the right hon. Gentleman has noticed, but we have just had a referendum. It is called a general election, and we won. We won on the social chapter and our policy of producing a result at Amsterdam. As usual, the right hon. Gentleman is simply trying it on. Is this not his bid for leadership for the Tory party?

Mr. Redwood: There was no referendum on Europe. A general election covers all issues, and is a judgment on the rival programmes of the Government and Opposition parties. We know the verdict of the people on the general issue, but not on the European issue. However, the Prime Minister, then the Leader of the Opposition, became extremely Euro-sceptic during the election campaign, because at one point he was deeply worried that he would lose votes by being too friendly to Brussels and offering to surrender too many powers.

I repeat that, in fairness, the Government should hold a referendum if they wish to surrender any more of Britain's democratic powers. I wonder whether some Ministers

around the Cabinet table have realised how difficult their task will be to achieve what they want for the regions of the United Kingdom, to implement their environmental policies and to champion the cause of our industry if they surrender those vetoes and have to accept the verdict of those around the Council table. They will discover that they will not always predominate, and they will be forced to act against their will.

I do not think that the new Ministers have any idea of the legal minefield into which they are leading the country, and how damaging it will be to our future as a vibrant, independent democracy, if they surrender all those powers.

We in the Conservative party stand for a Europe of nations. We believe that Europe is our continent, but not our country. We stand for true devolution of powers to families, individuals and free institutions, not to large, corporate governments in new and sometimes artificial parts of the United Kingdom. We want Britain to be a good ally, a reliable friend, a valued trading partner, and a country with global reach and ambitions. It is our duty to provide vigorous opposition when the Government are not working in the nation's interests, and to keep alive the flame of Conservative principles for better days.

5.33 pm

Mr. Dennis Canavan (Falkirk, West): If that was meant to be an election address by the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood), it is clear that if he becomes Leader of the Opposition, the Tory party will be vulcanised into opposition for many years to come. If he is intent on intervening in the referendum campaign in Scotland, the more often he comes up to Scotland the better, as I am sure that his presence there will help to maximise a double-yes vote in the referendum.

This is the first time in nearly 20 years that I have been able to give a general welcome to the contents of a Queen's Speech. It contains many measures that I wholeheartedly support, particularly those to improve education and training opportunities for young people by using the proceeds of a windfall tax and the abolition of the assisted places scheme. I also welcome the Government's commitment to introduce a national minimum wage to end the exploitation of low-paid workers.

The proposed ban on the private possession of handguns and the ban on tobacco advertising, will, I hope, help to save lives, and the national health service reforms should help to transfer resources from bureaucracy to patient care. However, in respect of the national health service and education, it is not enough simply to transfer resources from existing budgets. Those services require an injection of additional resources to bring about the necessary improvements and I hope that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer will bear that in mind.

I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Chancellor on his victory over the European Commission in his efforts to reduce VAT on domestic fuel and power, but I cannot say the same about his recent decision to give the Bank of England control over interest rates. It is ironic that, having campaigned for 18 years to get our hands on the levers of power, within less than a week of achieving that we have handed over one of the most powerful levers to the bankers. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor has said that it will lead to more stability, but we shall see.

I shall address most of my remarks to constitutional matters, particularly the proposed referendum on a Scottish Parliament. Last August, I wrote a rather prophetic article in the *Herald* stating:

"Just imagine the scenario in the immediate aftermath of a Labour victory at the next General Election.

The Tories will be in a state of complete disarray. They will be deeply divided, totally demoralised and much of their remaining energy will be dissipated in the search for a new leader. Those early months of a new Parliament would be the optimum time to hit the enemy when at their weakest, before they have time to reorganise. In such circumstances, there would be obvious advantages in introducing at the earliest opportunity the Bill to set up a Scottish Parliament in order to fulfil Labour's pledge to pass the legislation within the first Parliamentary Session."

However, the Labour leadership, in their wisdom or otherwise, have decided to publish a White Paper and then hold a referendum before introducing the legislation to set up a Scottish Parliament. I fail to see how that will speed up the legislative process.

In Scotland and Wales, we have received the greatest mandate that any Government have ever received for constitutional change. The Tory party, the party of the status quo, was annihilated at the general election. More than 90 per cent. of Scottish constituencies returned representatives of parties that are committed to the Scottish Constitutional Convention scheme for a Scottish Parliament. With such a mandate, there should be no need to pussyfoot around with a White Paper and then a referendum. The Government are, however, obviously committed to holding a referendum and, in those circumstances, the sooner it is held the better. I shall certainly be campaigning as hard as anyone for a double-yes vote: yes for a Scottish Parliament and yes for revenue-raising powers.

The Tories' so-called tartan tax campaign failed to win them a single seat in Scotland, so we should be more positive in putting the case for a Scottish Parliament that has legislative and economic powers, including revenue-raising powers. No meaningful Parliament anywhere in the world is without revenue-raising powers. If the people of Scotland want to spare an extra penny or twopence in tax to create a better national health service or better educational opportunities for their children, that is their democratic right, and the House should not stand in their way.

I still do not think that holding a referendum is a particularly good idea, but the Government are obviously determined to hold one. In view of that, I urge my right hon. and hon. Friends to hold the referendum and introduce legislation to set up a Scottish Parliament as soon as possible. I urge them to get that legislation on the statute book in this Session. I was pleased to hear my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition give such a commitment in reply to my question earlier in the debate.

Mr. John McAllion (Dundee, East): The Prime Minister.

Mr. Canavan: Sorry, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister. Like him, I am finding it difficult getting used to the new terminology. I was delighted to hear my right hon. Friend reiterate the commitment.

The people of Scotland have already waited too long for a real Parliament with economic as well as legislative powers. It is now up to us to finish what John Smith described as "unfinished business". The people have spoken through the ballot box and it is up to us to deliver.

5.41 pm

Rev. Ian Paisley (North Antrim): I congratulate you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, on presiding over our proceedings and wish you well in your role as the Chairman of Ways and Means. I hope that I will not run foul of your rulings, and that, one with the other, we will live in peace. Nevertheless, those of us who represent minorities have a duty to speak our minds and represent those who sent us to the House.

I very much welcome the assurance given by the Prime Minister today in answer to my question. The promise to all parties to the talks that are going on at the moment was that, whatever the outcome, the final voice heard would be that of the people. It is clear that there will be the opportunity in Scotland and Wales to vote in referendums. It is only fair that any proposals that emerge from the talks should go before the people.

I welcome the assurance today more than ever because we are entering a very serious time in our Province. There are heightening Unionist fears and heightening fears among the nationalist people. The past weeks have seen an upsurge in evil crime in our Province. A Roman Catholic man was beaten to death in Portadown and, in a tit-for-tat retaliation, a Protestant man was viciously beaten to the point of death in Londonderry. A police officer was murdered in Belfast, and the night before last republicans in Dungannon attacked the homes of Protestants. Only by the mercy of God did two families escape burning to death. The oldest Presbyterian church in Northern Ireland, Carland Presbyterian church, was attacked at the same time. In County Antrim, a Roman Catholic man who trained young people in engineering techniques in my constituency was brutally murdered.

There is a downward spiral of terrorism. It is therefore important that the people of Northern Ireland are assured about what the new Government are going to be up to.

The right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) had some things to say about Europe. My attitude to Europe is very well known. There is a change in Europe. The hon. Member for Foyle (Mr. Hume), the leader of the SDLP, and I had a meeting with Emma Bonino at seven o'clock this morning. It was the most constructive meeting that we have ever had. It seems that, with the Labour Government coming into power, there will be a definite movement on the beef crisis. We certainly all came away greatly encouraged. I hope that such movement will occur.

In addition, the President of the European Commission made a very good announcement yesterday. He told the hon. Member for Foyle, Mr. Nicholson, the other Northern Irish Member of the European Parliament, and myself that the Commission would continue its payments of special peace and reconciliation money to Ulster. That payment was due to stop at the end of three years, but is now to continue for five years. Over next year and the year after, 100 million ecu will go to Northern Ireland, which I certainly welcome.

I trust that there will be a resolution of the beef crisis. Our economy is based on beef. Economies in other parts of the United Kingdom share the need for such a resolution. It is a matter of great urgency that the beef crisis is resolved. Voices have been raised in the House about the way in which that should be done. Parts of the country that can fulfil the criteria should not be held back by other parts that cannot. A start could be made and we

[Rev. Ian Paisley]

could resolve the problem altogether for every part of the United Kingdom, which I am sure every hon. Member would welcome. There is some movement in Europe, and I trust that it will continue.

We need to look again at the policies that the Conservative party foisted on the people of Northern Ireland. I heard the very strong appeal of the right hon. Member for Wokingham that the people should be consulted. The people of Northern Ireland were never consulted about what the Tories did. I was amazed to hear what he said about asking the people. A piece of Tory legislation said that it did not matter how many people voted in Northern Ireland as long as there was a 1 per cent. majority—even if only 30 per cent. of all the people voted. The status of Northern Ireland within the United Kingdom has been changed. Now the right hon. Gentleman is saying that we must have weighted majorities. I hope that he will extend that logic to Northern Ireland—but I doubt it.

The people of Scotland have every right to say in a referendum how they wish to be governed in the United Kingdom. The people of Wales have every right to do the same. There is a great argument about what will happen if we have local Parliaments and whether one should speak on matters that relate to what is happening under them. That happened in Ulster. I was a Member of both Stormont and this House and there was never any difficulty about it. Members from both Parliaments were able to ask questions that related to what was happening in Northern Ireland. Perhaps the Government should look back at what happened in previous times.

I trust that what the Prime Minister said today about education, employment and youth training will be applied rigorously in Northern Ireland. At present, Northern Ireland faces the serious loss of 2,000 jobs in the action for community employment programme. Those assisted jobs, in which young people were given skills training, will be lost. That Tory Government policy was resisted by both the SDLP and the Unionist Members. Nevertheless, the axe is coming down and 2,000 jobs for young people will be cut off at a stroke. I hope that the Government will be able to prevent those swingeing cuts, already decided by the outgoing Tory Government, from taking place in Northern Ireland.

A total of 600 teachers in Northern Ireland are to lose their jobs. The Conservative Government said that they were translating the money from education to defence. Children and parents in Northern Ireland are to suffer because of IRA and other terrorists. That would not be tolerated in any other part of the United Kingdom. Therefore, I trust that the principles set out by the Prime Minister will be applied as rigorously in Northern Ireland as in the rest of the United Kingdom.

Many of the teachers who are to lose their jobs will be mature teachers taking voluntary redundancy because they have been told that there is no place for them. If mature teachers are taken out of a school, new teachers will have no one to help them with their problems. They will be on their own. The resulting gap in a child's education can never be made up. I make a plea to the House today to think of the children of Northern Ireland.

If it had been suggested to the people of Manchester that, because of the horrific bomb there, money was to be taken from the city's schools, there would have been an

outcry in the House. If it had been said that there would be larger classes and fewer teachers around Canary Wharf, that, too, would have caused an outcry. Yet that is what is happening in Northern Ireland. I welcome the fact that the Government have today set out their stall and said what they are aiming at.

A previous Minister writing to us in Northern Ireland about the teachers said:

"Over the last two years the improved security situation meant that it was possible to transfer substantial sums from the Northern Ireland Law and Order budget to other Northern Ireland programmes, and schools and their pupils have shared in the benefits of this . . . At the time it was necessary to make clear that if the security situation worsened the savings from the Law and Order budget might have to be restored."

None of us had ever heard that before. No such statement was made. The Minister continued:

"This has been the case and over the next three years £120 million of resources released for other programmes such as education have had to be transferred back to the Law and Order programme."

One can understand why a letter in such terms resulted in an outcry in Northern Ireland.

I welcome the fact that the Government will take those matters on board. I welcome the Ministers who have been appointed to consider those matters. I trust that the bread and butter issues will be handled in a way that will give hope, comfort and strength to our people.

I am coming quickly to a close because I have a plane to catch. If I miss it, I will have to stay all night and I have only just returned from Europe. However, I want to draw attention to the problem of parades which resulted from a change in Northern Ireland legislation as a result of the Anglo-Irish Agreement and the influence of Dublin which destroyed the right to hold traditional parades. As a result, we have serious problems, which the House must face up to, as have all the elected representatives of Northern Ireland.

We have difficult days ahead, but I trust that there will be better days for our Province when the policies that we have heard about today come through on the ground to give strength, courage, hope and a better future to its young people.

5.55 pm

Mr. David Marshall (Glasgow, Shettleston): I congratulate you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, on your appointment. I wish you well in your new role as Deputy Speaker and Chairman of Ways and Means.

The right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) argued that Labour did not do as well on 1 May as the Tories did in 1992, but the election showed that the electorate were determined to kick the Tories out of power. Many people voted tactically—hence the overwhelming support for Labour candidates and the unusually high support for Liberal Democrats, nationalists and even, in one classic case, a completely independent candidate. The right hon. Gentleman does not seem to have learnt the lesson that it is not votes but seats that matter. It will take his party a long time to recover from the debacle of a fortnight ago.

The people of Shettleston are the salt of the earth: ordinary working-class men, women and children who have suffered badly at the hands of the Tories for the past 18 years—suffered because my constituency contains above-average numbers of pensioners and people who are

unemployed and unskilled, on low incomes or benefits, not because they want to be but because they have no alternative. Those most vulnerable members of our society are the very people who have been harmed by Tory policies.

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): Is it not a fact that when, just before the dissolution of Parliament, the then Minister, the right hon. Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack), who is now sitting on the Opposition Front Bench, answered a question on the national minimum wage and those full-time workers who did not earn enough to pay tax, he showed that he had no understanding of people on low pay in his constituency and mine, which was one reason why the Conservatives lost the election?

Mr. Marshall: As usual, my hon. Friend hits the nail on the head. However, the right hon. Gentleman was not the only Minister who suffered from that problem; they all did. The Tory Government's policies put profits before people and the greedy before the needy. Those are not just words of rhetoric; they were facts of life under a Tory Government. Let us earnestly hope that they never return to haunt us again.

In the debate on the Loyal Address on 23 October last year I forecast that the people of Britain would awaken on Friday 2 May to a Labour Government. However, no one, no matter how optimistic, could have forecast the scale of Labour's victory and the electorate's almost total rejection of the Tories.

Unlike five years ago, when a huge, dark cloud of gloom and despair hung over Scotland in the days after the general election, this time there was almost universal rejoicing and sheer happiness—rejoicing that the dark days were over; rejoicing and almost disbelief that Scotland and Wales were Tory-free zones; rejoicing, especially in Shettleston, that people could now look forward to a better, brighter future starting with today's Queen's Speech. Indeed, that better, brighter future started on 2 May, and I hope that it will continue for at least the next 10 years and even longer.

I made my maiden speech on 14 June 1979, but since then there have been two parliamentary boundary commission changes and at this election the new Shettleston constituency was substantially changed from what it was then. It still contains the headquarters of Scotland's other national drink, Barr's Inn Bru, and it is still the home of Glasgow Celtic football club, the first British team to win the European champions cup, which it did in 1967. Happily enough—there were previously question marks over the future of the club—it is now the proud possessor of a brand new £30 million stadium which would be the pride of any city in the country.

The traditional areas of my constituency—Parkhead, Shettleston, Tollcross and parts of Bridgeton and Dalmarnock—have been supplemented by the addition of the rest of Bridgeton and Dalmarnock, Calton, including the famous Glasgow Barras, Govanhill, Gorbals, Hutchesontown and Oatlands. Glasgow Green and the People's Palace, which is a world-famous working-class museum full of the history of the city and the working-class movement are also included, in a seat that includes the east end and the south side of the city, with the River Clyde running in between. The boundaries may have changed substantially and the name may be a bit of

a problem—I hear my hon. Friend the Member for Greenock and Inverclyde (Dr. Godman) referring to that—but that is a problem created by the boundary commission.

What have not changed are problems in the constituency. The electorate showed what they thought of the Tory Government when they gave the Tory candidate a miserable 5.5 per cent. of the vote. Everyone was disappointed that it was not 1 per cent. less so that the candidate lost the deposit.

The electorate gave a massive 73.16 per cent. of the vote—the highest percentage for any candidate for any party in Scotland—to the Labour party. That is not really surprising when one considers that what is now Shettleston constituency was formerly five separate constituencies. That illustrates vividly the dramatic decrease in the population of the city, which has happened for all sorts of reasons.

The seat was the cradle of the old Independent Labour party. In 75 years, Shettleston has had only four Members of Parliament: John Wheatley, John McGovern, Myer Galpern—who graced the Chair with tremendous dignity in the 1974 to 1979 Parliament before he moved to the House next door—and me.

Other former Members of Parliament who have represented parts of the new constituency include the legendary Jimmy Maxton, Jimmy Carmichael and Jimmy Bennett for Bridgeton—the area must have had a liking for Jimmies, which is continued by some of my honourable colleagues—the Rev. Campbell Steven for Camlachie, Tom McMillan, Bob McTaggart and Mike Watson for Central, George Buchanan for Blackfriars, and Alice Cullen and Frank and Ellen McElhone in Gorbals, which later became Queen's Park. Unfortunately, as a result of the boundary changes, Mike Watson did not find a seat. I hope that it will not be long before he is back in the political main stream.

The greatest asset of the Shettleston constituency is its people and the many hundreds of acres of derelict land, which could well provide the future prosperity of Glasgow. I look forward to the day when once again my constituency becomes the workshop of the city.

My constituents are already delighted at the very positive start made by the Labour Government, and they will give a warm welcome to the Queen's Speech. They are already delighted at the proposals to reduce VAT on fuel bills to 5 per cent. That is especially true of the many thousands of pensioners who live in houses that are damp and difficult to heat or in multi-storey flats. Let us hope that there will be more good news to come, especially for pensioners.

There is a great deal to commend in the Gracious Speech, including measures to ban all handguns, which every civilised person must support; measures to improve, restore and tackle the problems of the national health service and to tackle unemployment and homelessness, especially among young people; measures on education and training and the introduction of a national minimum wage, which will be a pathway out of poverty for many thousands of people; and the proposal to sign the European social chapter. All those measures have my full support, as does the Bill to hold a referendum, which will pave the way to set up a Scottish Parliament. I also support the windfall levy to create jobs, the measures to combat crime, and the proposals to improve food safety

[Mr. Marshall]

and to put some of the proceeds of the national lottery to much better use. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and his Cabinet on all those measures.

I hope that my right hon. and hon. Friends will resist any suggestions that the Post Office and Royal Mail should be privatised. By all means, give the postal service more opportunity to compete, but it should and must be kept in the public sector. Indeed, far from diminishing the role of the Crown post office network, we should maintain and expand it. People love and trust the network. They depend on it in so many ways. Let us keep it that way.

Unlike the leader of the Liberal party, I welcome the tax on mobile phones. It is, after all, only the cost of a few seconds of airtime each week. It would really be nice if we could find a much cheaper way of installing telephones in the homes of the many thousands of people who do not have one phone, let alone several, and who cannot afford the very high installation costs involved.

As the acting chairman of the British group of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, I welcome the commitment to tackle global poverty and promote sustainable development, and to rejoin the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation. I hope that we will take the lead in the world in campaigning for a worldwide ban on the use, sale and transfer of anti-personnel land mines. Those evil, inhumane weapons must be outlawed as soon as possible, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton, North (Mr. Cook) on his work in that respect.

As an active trade unionist and a member of the Transport and General Workers Union for 37 years, I hope that the Labour Government will work closely with the trade union movement for the benefit of the nation as a whole. Trade unions have a useful and worthwhile role to play, and we should always remember that it was the trade union movement that created the Labour party. Let us all work together. The lifting of the ban on trade union membership at GCHQ is a welcome beginning.

I was particularly pleased to see in the Labour party manifesto the commitment to join with local government in a concerted attack on the multiple causes of social and economic decline—unemployment, bad housing, crime, poor health and a degraded environment. I am sure that that can only be good news for cities such as Glasgow and constituencies such as mine. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and my right hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, Anniesland (Mr. Dewar), the Secretary of State for Scotland, are only too well aware of the problems facing Glasgow. It is not only the city council but Glasgow development agency, Greater Glasgow health board and Scottish Homes that need help.

Only central Government can help Glasgow to tackle the massive problems facing the city that justify the city's being classed as a special case in Scotland. For a start, allowing the city to retain all the business rates that it collects would make a difference of £50 million a year or £1 million a week to the income that it receives. I look forward with great optimism to seeing measures introduced that once again will let Glasgow flourish and to seeing the reappearance of the old corporation motto for the city.

The most burning issue in Scottish politics in recent years has been the Tories' failed attempt to privatise Scotland's water. It would be a tremendously popular act

in Scotland to abolish the water quangos set up by the Tories and return water and sewerage to full public control and accountability. I hope that my right hon. Friends will ensure that that is done as soon as possible.

6.7 pm

Mr. Tony Baldry (Banbury): I wish to congratulate you from this side of the House on your appointment and wish you well, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Clearly, the people have spoken, but the "landslide" in seats does not reflect a landslide of popular support for Labour. Labour received little more popular support than did the Conservatives when we won the general election in 1992, with a smaller but workable majority, so anyone who thinks that 1 May 1997 represented some watershed in United Kingdom politics is seriously mistaken—quite the contrary. The only way in which the Labour party could make itself electable was to abandon clause IV socialism and accept and embrace much of Conservative philosophy. It accepted a vigorous market economy and the benefits of privatisation and low personal taxation. People were prepared to risk voting Labour only because they felt that Labour had taken on board and accepted many of the achievements of Thatcherism.

Labour also won because the expectations that it encouraged among electors far exceeded its actual pledges. Its pledges—modest though they are—exceed its ability to deliver. I predict a short honeymoon for the Government, because they have raised among electors expectations that they will find difficult to deliver.

During the general election campaign, the Labour party distributed a pledge card, which it suggested that people should keep. I am certainly keeping my copy. Pledge 1 was to cut class sizes to 30 or under for five, six and seven-year-olds, using money saved from the assisted places scheme. Labour's core campaign pledge on education was therefore to give the impression that all classes would soon consist of fewer than 30 pupils.

However, Labour's maths is hopelessly wrong. The Chancellor of the Exchequer has claimed that abolishing the assisted places scheme would save £268 million, but he forgot that it would cost an estimated £208 million to send all the children with assisted places back to state schools. That is simply because most of those with assisted places incur only marginal costs. The actual cost of an assisted place is not much greater than that of a place in a state school.

Mr. Frank Cook: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that one of the purposes of an assisted places scheme is not only to give the individual child a preferential education but to act as a hidden subsidy to the establishment providing that education?

Mr. Baldry: The hon. Gentleman is missing my point. He and his right hon. and hon. Friends will have to focus on it fairly speedily.

During the general election campaign, Labour Members and candidates gave the impression that the size of all key stage 1 classes in the United Kingdom would soon be reduced to 30 or fewer pupils, on the sole basis of money released from the assisted places scheme, without other funds.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer made it clear that he would adopt for the next two years the departmental public spending targets set by the former Conservative

Chancellor. The only way in which money can be found within the education budget is to take it from under another heading, and the only such heading that the Government can find is the assisted places scheme.

I am simply making the point—history will prove whether I am right—that the maths does not add up. The money is not there, and that will cause considerable disappointment. The gap in Labour's funding plans will continue every year into the future, as new pupils are denied assisted places and have to be found places in state schools.

There is a further specific test for Labour concerning the schools in my county of Oxfordshire. The county council has been hung for about 12 years, and has got its finances into a pickle, not least because Labour and Liberal county councillors have combined to drive spending up year on year. Oxfordshire has also spent all its reserves, so it is in a mess. That is why, shortly before the county council elections and the general election, Labour and Conservative county councillors agreed to set a budget above cap, and have now asked the Department of the Environment whether they can be allowed to spend above their cap.

An early test for Labour in my part of the world is whether the Government will accede to the request by Labour county councillors in Oxfordshire and allow the council to set a budget above cap. If they do not, the prospect of reducing class sizes in the county seems slim, whether or not the money from the assisted places scheme is available.

At present, about 80 classes in Oxfordshire contain 31 or more children. It must be said that such class sizes often reflect the fact that head teachers want especially small classes elsewhere. The biggest class in the county has 42 pupils, but that happens to be in the only grant-maintained school in the county, and it exists because the physical structure of the school will not permit smaller classes. Notwithstanding the existence of such a large class, that school is in the top 10 in the whole of England. It is one of the best performing primary schools, with 100 per cent. of its pupils achieving the highest possible standards.

Personally, I do not believe that too much should be read into class sizes alone. However, that is the test, the benchmark, that the Labour party has set itself. That is its education priority, so I shall scrutinise closely to see how much extra money comes to Oxfordshire for education, and how many Oxfordshire key stage 1 classes consist of more than 30 pupils in six months' time, a year's time, and so on.

The next pledge on Labour's pledge card was fast-track punishment for persistent young offenders, to be achieved by halving the time between arrest and sentencing. We shall see how that works out in practice in the juvenile court system, but I suspect that in Oxfordshire, as elsewhere, most people are more concerned about the number of police officers out and about on the beat, and about safety on our streets.

This year—the last year of an outgoing Conservative Government—Thames Valley police secured 91 additional police officers, plus an extra 15 civilian staff, as well as substantial investment in computers and technology. I shall scrutinise carefully year on year to see whether Thames Valley police will be able to maintain that level of improvement in police manpower.

The third pledge on the card was to cut national health service waiting lists and treat an extra 100,000 patients, by releasing £100 million from elsewhere in the NHS. The Labour party says that it will abolish the internal market but maintain the purchaser-provider relationship. We shall all watch with interest to see how on earth that will work.

Labour also says that it will scrap GP fundholding and have local collectives of general practitioners determining purchasing policy. Again, we have seen little of the detail of that scheme, and it will be interesting to see how it turns out.

It is especially disingenuous to raise expectations that waiting lists will be eliminated overnight, or at least substantially reduced, by finding £100 million somewhere within the NHS budget. That sum represents only 0.4 per cent. of the NHS budget—the equivalent of one day's spend. Moreover, if, as has been suggested, the Labour Government intend to release that money simply by sacking NHS managers, there will, of course, be offsetting redundancy costs, so it is questionable whether we shall see even that £100 million.

Before criticising managers in the national health service, it is always worth remembering that the NHS is a £42 billion operation, and that good management is needed if that money is to be directed to patient care. However, new Labour has chosen to make hospital waiting lists its benchmark, by which it believes its performance on the NHS must be judged, so that is what will happen.

On 31 March, 412 people had been on the waiting list for more than six months, either as in-patients or as out-patients, at Horton general hospital in my constituency. Let us see what that figure is in six months' time, a year's time, two years' time, and so on. I suspect that there will be a period of confusion within the national health service as hospital services try to take on board yet another period of change and GP fundholding disappears. I also suspect that, far from shortening, waiting lists will lengthen. Let us see.

The Labour Government have invited us to judge them on class sizes, on police manpower and on NHS waiting lists, and we shall certainly do so. All those services are funded by central Government, with allocations decided on the basis of a formula. My concern is that changes to the formula, whether they affect the standard spending assessment used for allocating money to local authorities or the method used to allocate money to health services, will inevitably be to the detriment of areas such as Oxfordshire. I shall scrutinise carefully any such changes to see what impact they will have on my constituents, and on other similar constituencies.

The Queen's Speech contains something else of relevance to that point. It suggests the possibility in the not too foreseeable future of a Scottish Parliament and a Welsh Assembly, with the likelihood that English Members of Parliament, such as me, will no longer have a say or a vote on matters such as education and health in Scotland or Wales, whereas Scottish Members, such as the hon. Member for Glasgow, Shettleston (Mr. Marshall), and Welsh Members too, will continue to have a say in and a vote on health and education in England. I predict that there will be growing resentment in England about such different treatment of different parts of the United Kingdom—particularly if resources are diverted from shire England.

[Mr. Baldry]

Labour also pledged to take a quarter of a million of those aged under 25 off benefit and into work. Unemployment figures are clearly intended to be a benchmark of Labour's success or failure. It will be interesting to see whether Labour intends to change the basis on which unemployment statistics are collected and collated. Labour Members have consistently criticised the present system, and I shall be interested to see whether they change it—I somehow doubt that they will.

In Banbury the unemployment rate is below 3 per cent. and in Bicester it is below 2 per cent. We shall have to wait to see to what extent the creation of a quarter of a million jobs displaces existing jobs. Presumably, employers will be offered a subsidy to take on trainees who may displace existing employees. We must also wait to see whether such jobs prove to be long term.

Another issue presaged in the Queen's Speech is the impact of the statutory minimum wage. Either the minimum wage will be set at a level that is so low as to be meaningless or it will be set higher than existing market levels and employers will be forced by statute to pay their employees more than they earn at present. That will undoubtedly cost jobs, but we shall have to wait to see how many. Like other hon. Members, I shall scrutinise closely any effects on the labour market in my constituency and elsewhere. There seems to be little point in raiding funds from profitable and successful United Kingdom companies by way of a windfall tax if we then see the displacement of existing jobs and other Government measures that destroy jobs.

The last pledge on Labour's pledge card is to ensure low inflation and low interest rates. After only a few days of Labour Government, we have seen interest rates and mortgage interest rates rise. I shall watch with interest to see how mortgage interest rates fare in the coming months. If, as is widely predicted, the Chancellor of the Exchequer also abolishes mortgage interest relief at source, home owners with an average mortgage will be significantly worse off.

Of course, our opposition to the Queen's Speech and to other Government proposals will always be constructive. However, we shall scrutinise the Government's activities closely and ensure that people understand clearly whether Labour is delivering on its election promises. There is another reason why I suspect the Government's honeymoon will be short-lived and why I am confident that my right hon. and hon. Friends and I will again sit on the Government Benches in due course. The size of the Government's majority may well prove to be their undoing. It is a case of new Labour, new arrogance.

We have already seen several examples of that arrogance. If a Conservative Chancellor had sought to change the basis of the relationship between the Treasury and the Bank of England without having the courtesy to make a statement about it in the House, there would quite rightly have been uproar in this place. Labour Members would have jumped to their feet to raise points of order, demanding to know why the Chancellor had not made a statement.

It would have made no difference to the Bank of England if the Chancellor had delayed his decision for a week, two weeks or 10 days in order to allow him to come first to the House to make a statement. Even before many new Labour

Members of Parliament were sworn in, the Labour Government were taking executive decisions with no reference to Parliament. I suspect that that arrogance will prove to be their undoing. We saw other examples of it this afternoon during the Prime Minister's speech.

The Labour party may have a massive majority and the Conservatives may have a mere 165 seats in Parliament, but I guarantee that we will win the arguments in the House and that we can, and will, win the next general election.

6.24 pm

Mr. Barry Jones (Alyn and Deeside): I am pleased to follow the hon. Member for Banbury (Mr. Baldry) in the debate, but I disagree with everything he said. I note his confidence, but I fear that it is misplaced.

Today, we have witnessed a debate of great contrasts. The former Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major), and present Leader of Her Majesty's Opposition made a very disciplined and restrained speech that I thought hid his quiet dismay. I thought that his speech accepting victory in his constituency while acknowledging defeat nationally was extremely dignified. I greatly appreciated his remarks about his wife. It was good to see him acknowledging the real help that he had received from that very important and close quarter.

While listening to the speech of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, I was struck by his élan, vigour and genuine confidence. I support his comments and all that is in the Gracious Speech. I wish to draw attention to several parts of it. It states:

"My Government intends to govern for the benefit of the whole nation."

I cheer that statement because I think that one of the most reprehensible consequences of the past 18 years of Tory government was the emergence of great divisions in British society. There is now an almost unbridgeable gulf between those who do well and those who have very little: the poor, the unemployed and those who are in poor housing. We must all cheer a British Government who say that they are determined to govern for the benefit of the whole nation.

The second statement to which I want to refer immediately follows the first:

"The education of young people will be my Government's first priority."

I met many parents during the general election campaign, and I have never known them to be so concerned about their children's education. In my constituency and my county, a great deal of credit is due to the Government for announcing that the unwelcome and unsupported nursery voucher scheme will be scrapped. That is good news in Flintshire and in Wales.

I am also glad that the assisted places scheme will be phased out. I calculated recently that about £21 million had been made available for the scheme in Wales. If a similar sum had been available in my county and in Wales as a whole, we could have tackled many problems. I wish the Government well in advancing towards their objectives.

I see the fingerprints of my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer on the paragraph in the Queen's Speech that says:

"The central economic objectives of my Government are high and stable levels of economic growth and employment".

I think that that is a direct quotation of the Queen's Speech of Mr. Attlee's first Administration at the end of the second world war. The Chancellor has taken the initiative and gained great support by facing up to a big decision—that the Bank of England should have operational responsibility for setting interest rates. My right hon. Friend has shown that he is a decisive Chancellor who has a strategy and is adept also at tactical manoeuvres. With this one decision—taken so early in the life of the Government—he has shown that he can lead and will never be afraid to take the toughest decisions.

My constituents will welcome the Government's pledge to mount a fundamental attack upon youth and long-term unemployment and to take early steps to implement a welfare-to-work programme to tackle unemployment, financed by a levy on the excess profits of the privatised utilities. There is considerable long-term unemployment in my constituency, and its consequences affect everybody. My constituents are anxious about break-ins, the growth in crime, graffiti, vandalism and anti-social behaviour by people aged under 24.

The target we have set, to get 250,000 people off benefits and into work and/or training is perhaps our most ambitious declaration of all. If we can pull it off, we will make a real contribution to the well-being of the nation as a whole. We have set ourselves a hard task, but I believe that a nation facing the problems that Britain faces must take up the challenge. To see our effort promulgated so effectively so early in the life of the Government must be a major plus.

Many right hon. and hon. Members will agree that, in many of our large housing estates, there is a considerable bad neighbour problem. If my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary can introduce legislation to enable social workers, housing officers and the police to tackle this cancer in the midst of many respectable communities, he will be doing a signal service.

Perhaps my council in Flintshire will cheer loudest at the proposal to enable capital receipts from the sale of council houses to be invested in house building and renovation as part of the Government's determination to deal with homelessness and unemployment. I noticed problems when winter was particularly hard at the turn of the year. For about a month, a very cold wind blew and hundreds of thousands of houses throughout Britain had freezing rooms because the windows and doors were rotten and were letting in cold drafts.

Many houses in the large and aging estates of my constituency do not have central heating, and many hundreds of my constituents live in houses that cannot be kept warm when it is cold. That places major pressures on young mothers, some of whom have told me that they cannot put their young children in bedrooms upstairs when winter is severe simply because they are too icy, cold or damp. I am stating a truism that distresses many hundreds of my younger constituents. It is not an exaggeration to say that in some bedrooms at the height of winter there are icicles. That cannot be right, particularly if a youngster living there has a bronchitic chest.

The Government's proposal will not only bring happiness, comfort, warmth and dignity to families when their windows and doors are replaced and when central heating is installed, but help the local builder gain greater prosperity. He will be able to employ more people to carry

out the repairs, modernisations and new build. The same could be said of local glaziers who will be able to take on more staff to tackle the job. On behalf of my county council, I say thank you to the Government for bringing along a practical and necessary reform.

We have said that we will cut class sizes, that we will cut waiting lists, that we will deal with young thugs, that we will give hope and jobs to young people and that we will deliver prosperity that lasts. I am certain that we will do these things and that Britain will be a better place in which to live. I believe that, with my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister at the helm, these objectives can be achieved. I wish the Government well and congratulate them on bringing forward an excellent Queen's Speech.

6.35 pm

Mr. Dafydd Wigley (Caernarfon): Mr. Deputy Speaker, as the first hon. Member you have to called to speak, may I congratulate you on your appointment and wish you well in your elevated position.

I wish to thank the electors of Caernarfon for allowing me to return to the House, and I congratulate the Government on their general election victory. It was a landslide victory with a swing of a size that I have never seen. Those who remember 1945 may have seen something similar, but it was something that I had never seen. The Government certainly have a mandate to carry out their programme.

I welcome the Queen's Speech to a large extent, but I have reservations on some issues, and there are one or two omissions to which I should like to refer. However, by and large, it is a breath of fresh air after what we have had in recent years. At this point, I wish to add to the reservations that have been expressed by members of several parties about style of government, and the Government's declared intention of taking an inclusive approach. I am referring not to the Bank of England matter at this point—I shall do so later—but to matters relating to this House, such as the reduction in the amount of time available for Welsh questions from 45 minutes to 30. This will hit hard not only Opposition Members, but Government Back Benchers. It is unacceptable that that decision was taken without any consultation, and I hope that the Government will rethink their approach towards other parties on this matter.

One of my concerns about the Queen's Speech—much of the thrust of which I welcome—is whether the figures add up. Will there be sufficient resources to deliver the job creation, education and health care we want? I listened carefully to the hon. Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mr. Jones), who referred to education in Wales. We know that education has been devastated and that 500 teaching posts have been lost in Wales. Those posts are much needed, and if we are to get smaller classes—as is indicated in the Government's programme—we need resources to employ those 500 teachers. Frankly, the money that will come from the assisted places scheme will not be enough. The hon. Gentleman said that £21 million was available, but the actual amount available for one year in Wales is £3 million.

Mr. Barry Jones: The £21 million is the money spent so far on the scheme.

Mr. Wigley: Precisely. The annual figure is £3 million. Releasing £3 million to the education sector in Wales does

[Mr. Wigley]

not start to make up for the loss of 500 teaching posts, let alone the additional work needed on the quality of school buildings and the development of education. I join him, however, in welcoming unreservedly the scrapping of the nursery voucher scheme, which was never needed in Wales. Ninety per cent. of our four-year-olds already have nursery education, and the remaining 10 per cent. can easily be catered for without such a bureaucratic scheme.

On health care, what came out very strongly in the general election campaign in Wales was the threat to existing community hospitals, which are under threat of closure because of a lack of resources. Promised community hospitals—one in Holywell, not far from the hon. Gentleman's constituency, and one at Porthmadog in my constituency—that should have come on stream this year will not now go ahead because of a lack of resources. The cancer treatment facility that was promised for Bangor, and for which resources have been collected from the voluntary sector, will also not go ahead because of a lack of resources.

The health care sector needs more money if those schemes are to go ahead and if the existing community hospitals that are under threat are to be saved. I do not believe that our share of the £100 million for England and Wales—£6 million, or whatever it is—will be enough to look after more than one community hospital. More resources are needed. I agree with the argument that was made from the Liberal Benches: if we believe in public expenditure, we have to believe in the wherewithal and in the method of raising it. Income tax is the fairest way to achieve that objective. I believe that the standard rate should be put back to 25p. It should not be 23p, which Labour Members described, correctly, as a pre-election tax bribe. The change should not have taken place; we need the money in the public sector.

We support a number of issues raised in the Queen's Speech. For example, we support the emphasis on tackling youth unemployment, which is a cancer that runs through all societies. It needs to be tackled in the old industrial areas of north-west Wales, the old coal valley areas of south Wales and, indeed, in rural areas if the social problems that come in its wake are not to be generated. Giving that issue top priority is something that we most definitely support, and I hope that the Government are successful.

We welcome the adoption of the social chapter and are glad that it has moved ahead rapidly. We also welcome the declaration in support of a minimum wage. In many parts of Wales, wages are appallingly low—£1.50 and £1.80 an hour, perhaps even lower in some service industries. It should be set at £4 an hour to be meaningful, but assistance will have to be given to small companies that may be affected by its introduction. It may have to be phased in gradually. Assistance is already given through the family credit scheme, so if that can be phased out and the assistance given instead to the introduction of the minimum wage, all well and good.

We welcome the intended reduction in the use of tobacco, which is clearly necessary. We welcome the emphasis on human rights and on parliamentary reform. Some things, however, were missing from the Queen's Speech. There was not enough emphasis on the challenges that currently face agriculture in rural Wales. There has been reference to reform of the CAP, but there should be

a way of enabling young people to come into the industry. More than 50 per cent. of Welsh farmers are over 55. That gives an indication of the crisis to come. We have to rejuvenate the industry. Schemes that are available through the European Union should be available in Wales—and the rest of the UK for that matter—to tackle the problem.

I am particularly concerned that not much reference was made in the Queen's Speech to disability issues. It is of some concern to me that, in making ministerial appointments, responsibility for disability issues has been taken away from the Department of Social Security. There is now a Minister for Employment and Disability Rights at the Department for Education and Employment. It is not clear. Two Ministers have partial responsibility.

There was a cross-party meeting today of the disability lobby, which expressed considerable concern about whether there will be the same focus under the new regime as there was in the days when Alf Morris was Minister for Disabled People. We are concerned that there is no commitment to strengthening the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, or to the creation of a commission to take forward cases. No doubt there will be very strong lobbying on that matter.

I am also concerned that not much emphasis was given to the plight of state pensioners. Forty-five per cent. of pensioners in Wales have no income other than a state pension, and pensions have been held down in real terms since 1980 by virtue of the fact that the link with earnings was broken. I would rather that less was spent on nuclear weapons, on weapons of war, and on defence budgets, and that more was spent on pensioners so that they do not miss out on any improvement in the economy.

I have some reservations about the Government's decision on the Bank of England, but I can see the benefits that come from financial policy that is made objectively. Employment should have been added to inflation as a criterion for the setting of bank rates, as is the case in the United States. The Government should have made that a criterion in giving the Bank of England this new freedom. Without it, there is a danger that the need to create employment and avoid unemployment may be relegated to the bottom of the table of priorities.

On constitutional change, we understand that a Bill to provide for a referendum will be introduced very soon—it may be published this week and debated next week. No doubt it will specify a question that will refer to the Government's proposals as spelled out in a White Paper, but it appears that we are not to see the White Paper for some time, which will cause some difficulty, particularly in Wales. The Labour party's proposals were limited to four brief paragraphs out of 40 pages in its manifesto for Wales.

I was rather concerned by the words that the Prime Minister used in his opening speech. In the context of Wales—I think that I have his words correctly—he said, "particularly after moving to unitary local authorities, Wales needs an Assembly". I hope to goodness that the Government do not see the Assembly in the context of local government, because the last thing we want is a centralisation of local government or an additional tier of local government; we want a decentralisation of decision-taking from Westminster to Wales and a democratisation of the existing tier of bureaucracy in the

Welsh Office. I hope that that will be spelled out very clearly indeed, as it is a matter of considerable importance and concern to us.

In our Assembly, we want Wales to have the same powers that Scotland is being offered in its Parliament. We see no reason why Wales should not have primary law-making powers within our own elected tier of democracy. Considering the way in which Bills such as the Local Government (Wales) Bill passed through this Chamber and through its Committee stage, and the way in which the Welsh Language Act 1993 went through—through Committees then dominated by Members of Parliament from outside Wales—it would be totally unacceptable, if we have an elected Assembly, or Parliament, as we would like, if legislation that concerns only Wales should still have to go through this Chamber. If such a tier of government is created, it has to be given responsibility. I believe that that means responsibility in terms of legislation, finance and, perhaps, developing links with Europe.

We have seen how the German *lander* have been able to maximise their clout in the European structures in Brussels by virtue of the fact that they have a credible level of government. That link has to be developed by the Assembly that the Government intend for Wales. I would like an elected Parliament for Wales to have real powers. If the Government propose for Wales the model that is offered to Scotland—albeit it is short of what may ideally be necessary in Scotland—we would see that as a valuable step forward.

We await the White Paper that will spell out the Government's proposals for Wales. I hope that it will make it clear that what is being offered to Wales in 1997 is significantly stronger than what was proposed in 1979. The people of Wales need to be convinced that the tier of government that will be introduced will be able to make a material difference in terms of policy, education, health care, housing and jobs. The Government need to make that case. We will listen with considerable interest in the coming weeks to hear that case being made.

6.49 pm

Mrs. Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley): May I be the first on the Government Benches to congratulate you on your new position, Mr. Deputy Speaker? I know that you will bring to that office the essential qualities that you have brought to every office that you have held in the House. I am delighted by your appointment.

I am pleased to be on the Government side of the House after 18 years in opposition—five years in the European Parliament and 13 years in the House. To those of us who have been in the Opposition for such a long time, it is a great delight to be here. It is particularly pleasing that the number of women Members has doubled. As the only Welsh woman in the House for the past 13 years, I am glad that there are now four of us. That is a considerable improvement, as there have been only three previously this century. There is clearly a long way to go, but it is an important start. I am pleased to be in the House at this time.

Many important measures will be introduced in the first Session of Parliament, and I welcome that. The Government are addressing important issues very quickly. However, I am sorry that a freedom of information Act is missing, although there is a promise for the future. The Labour party's commitment to freedom of information

goes back more than 20 years. Since 1974, that commitment has appeared in manifesto after manifesto. Many hon. Members spend a considerable amount of time trying to obtain information from reluctant Ministers. We expend considerable effort in framing questions to elicit the information that is often denied us.

It has been suggested that early legislation was not possible because no one had had the time to work out what it should include. Apparently, we need a White Paper first. There has already been plenty of discussion. As long ago as March 1979, the Labour Government published a Green Paper entitled "Open Government". The Conservative Government published a White Paper with the same title in July 1993.

I read with some amazement that we could not have early legislation because no Bill was available. Freedom of information has been the subject of countless Bills, most of which were all-party measures. Many of them were introduced or sponsored by members of the present Government. In 1978, my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary introduced a freedom of information Bill, which was supported by my hon. Friend the Minister of State, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. In 1979, another Bill was introduced by my hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment. Many other Bills followed and were introduced by hon. Members from all parties.

As recently as December last year, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Mr. Foster), the then shadow Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, said that a Labour Government would

"take an early opportunity to legislate for a freedom of information Act. Bills are available and much of the work has been done by others who have preceded us . . . All the work has been done and it could be that, in 12 months' time, if the electorate do the sensible thing, freedom of information legislation will be on the statute book."—[*Official Report*, 10 December 1996; Vol. 287, c. 169.]

There was no sudden realisation. As long ago as January 1991, the then deputy leader of the Labour party and shadow Home Secretary said that freedom of information

"is not only suitable for early enactment. It is ready for early enactment. If a Labour Government was elected. . . I would be able to send the headings of a Bill to a parliamentary draughtsman on the following day."

It has been widely remarked that the new Government have hit the ground running. They have launched well-thought-out and well-developed new policies from day one. Rapid action is particularly important for freedom of information. If we have impressed Whitehall with our determination to press ahead with other policies, what message are we conveying by delaying action on that issue? I hope that the message is not that we are prepared to tolerate the time-honoured, closed Whitehall ways of getting things done now that Whitehall is supposed to be working for us.

Labour shadow Ministers went through intense preparation for office. They went on training courses, had meetings with permanent secretaries and had the help of my right hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman). They were forewarned of the dangers of losing sight of their own strategy and being sucked into their Department's agenda. Were they also briefed about the need to resist being seduced by secrecy?

When I first came to the House from the European Parliament, I asked the then Secretary of State for Defence, the right hon. Member for Henley

[Mrs. Ann Clwyd]

(Mr. Heseltine), two questions. His answer to both was that the information was confidential. However, three days earlier, the Supreme Allied Commander of NATO had given precise answers to those questions, and had briefed journalists in Brussels.

Secrecy is tempting. It makes life easier for Ministers and officials, and protects them from inconvenient questions. It allows Governments to get their business done with less challenge. It helps officials to conceal from the public their own uncertainty: the questions that have not been answered, and the problems that have been identified but not yet solved.

We should recognise the dangers of that approach. Having faced the problem across the Chamber for so many years, I have learnt that the dangers are obvious. A Government who insist on the right to operate in secrecy will quickly lose the ability to distinguish between what is in their own interests and what is in the public interest.

The Scott report concluded:

"In circumstances where disclosure might be politically or administratively inconvenient, the balance struck by the Government comes down, time and time again, against full disclosure."

Just before the recess, I undertook an investigation of my own. I found that more than 1,200 of the parliamentary answers given by former Ministers since Lord Justice Scott called for more openness in government were that the information requested could not be provided either on the ground of disproportionate cost or because it was not held centrally. Since February 1996, Ministers have used those devices over and again.

The Ministry of Defence cited those grounds on 73 occasions, Health Ministers used them on 360 occasions, the Department of Trade and Industry on 55 occasions, and the Foreign Office did so on 32 occasions. When he was interviewed recently on the anniversary of the publication of his report, Lord Justice Scott called on Members of Parliament to step up their attack on excessive Government secrecy. It is now clear that, even after the Scott report was published, former Ministers time after time used "disproportionate costs" and "information not held centrally" as blocking devices.

The report of the Franks committee dealt with the reform of section 2 of the Official Secrets Act 1911. It said:

"A government which pursues secret aims, or which operates in greater secrecy than the effective conduct of its proper functions requires, or which turns information services into propaganda agencies, will lose the trust of the people."

To lose the public's trust is no small thing. To a democratic Government, at least, it is fatal.

Today, obviously, we feel great delight—even euphoria—at the results of the election, the prospects that lie ahead and the start that has already been made; but the public look to us for more than new policies. They are looking for a new approach to politics, and that requires us to be honest about what we can achieve, to be prepared to admit to mistakes if we make them and to trust the public with information.

We should not be blind—I do not think that any of us is—to the enormous disillusionment that so many people have felt with politicians and the political process. We will fool ourselves if we believe that that disillusionment is directed exclusively at the previous Government, and

does not colour the way in which all politicians, and any Government, are unfortunately perceived by the public. If we appear to act in a high-handed way, denying information to the public and repeating the familiar chants that the facts are commercially confidential and disclosure would be premature, without good reason, we can be certain that cynicism will return more quickly than we may now imagine possible.

If we wait two or three years before legislating, Ministers will have slipped into the traditional cosy way of making decisions. It will seem familiar and natural: the dangers of exposing too much information will seem obvious, and the benefits will be harder to remember. The enthusiasm for openness may have evaporated. The legislation that is then introduced will be more tailored to the convenience of administrators, and less effective for the public. A policy that has been developed openly will have been tested more rigorously; any potential weakness will have been recognised before the policy is settled, and while there is time to get things right. The policy itself will be better, and will also enjoy wider public confidence.

We should not be afraid of freedom of information legislation. It already exists in New Zealand, Canada, Australia, the United States, Sweden, Hungary and many other countries. Ireland passed its freedom of information Act only last month. I read with interest the words of the former premier of Victoria about freedom of information in that state. He said that it was

"a bit like a compulsory random breath test on our roads. Motorists are aware of its presence and the ever-present likelihood of a check. Governments, likewise, are aware of the prospect of examination of a comprehensive list of documents on which a decision is based. Because of that the Act has had a significant impact on the quality of decision making."

I also recall what my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister said in March last year, at the presentation of the Campaign for Freedom of Information annual awards. He said:

"The crucial question is does the government regard people's involvement in politics as being restricted to periodic elections? Or, does it regard itself as in some sense in a genuine partnership with people?"

My right hon. Friend said that he did not believe that the impact of a freedom of information Act

"would simply be in the pure matter of legislation . . . It would also signal a culture change that would make a dramatic difference to the way that Britain is governed. The very fact of its introduction will signal a new relationship between government and people: a relationship which sees the public as legitimate stakeholders in the running of the country and sees election to serve the public as being given on trust . . . I regard it not merely as simply a list of commitments that we give because at some point in time, someone got up and agitated for it . . . It is genuinely about changing the relationship in politics today . . . A Freedom of Information Act is not just important in itself. It is part of bringing our politics up to date, of letting politics catch up with the aspirations of people and delivering not just more open but more effective and efficient government for the future."

That is as persuasive a case for early action on freedom of information as could have been made by anyone. I hope that we can make swift progress towards implementing the words of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister.

7.4 pm

Mr. Norman Baker (Lewes): First, let me thank the people of Lewes for returning me as their Member of Parliament. As the first Liberal, or non-Conservative,

to be returned to the constituency since 1874, I consider it a great privilege to be here, and to be able to speak in this most august of chambers. The vote that I received corresponds almost exactly to the percentage gained by the Labour Government—but, alas, I do not share their landslide in my constituency.

I pay tribute to the former Member of Parliament for Lewes, Mr. Tim Rathbone, who served the people of the constituency for 23 years. He was, and still is, a decent man: he worked for his constituents, and stood up for what he believed to be correct. He opposed the poll tax, for example. He was not afraid to stand up for the merits of involvement in Europe, although that was unfashionable in his party. Indeed, he found himself increasingly out of line with his party as time went on, but his opinions did not waver; they stayed where they were. I shall try to follow in that tradition in the House for the benefit of my constituents.

I can tell those who are not familiar with the Lewes constituency that it comprises four main towns. The first is Lewes itself, which has a strong radical tradition. In 1264, Simon de Montfort and his barons first curbed the power of the monarchy, and that led to the establishment of the country's first Parliament in 1265. Lewes also hosted Thomas Paine, author of *"The Rights of Man"*. I am very pleased to be able to represent a constituency with that record. Lewes is also home to the unique bonfire celebrations that occur in the county town of East Sussex, which I believe are unparalleled elsewhere. I hope that hon. Members who have not been to see those bonfire celebrations on 5 November will take the opportunity to do so.

The second major town in the constituency is Newhaven, which, in many ways, is its economic hub. It is also home to the Newhaven-Dieppe ferry. It is, I believe, part of my role as Member of Parliament for Lewes to ensure that that ferry service prospers, and that the economy of Newhaven and the wider area does so equally. A strong private-public partnership operates in the town, to which I hope to give succour and help during my time as a Member of Parliament.

The third town is Seaford. It is the largest town, containing 28 per cent. of the constituency's population, and is characterised by its friendliness and its interesting shops. The fourth is Polegate, which we welcome to the Lewes constituency: it was formerly part of Eastbourne. It is regarded—although not by those who live there—as a suburb of Eastbourne, but it is an independent, long-established settlement with its own individual and vibrant identity.

The constituency also contains substantial and very attractive rural areas, many of them areas of outstanding natural beauty. They include the South Downs, and I should particularly mention the settlements of Beddingham, Glynde and Firle. That is the area in which I was returned as a district councillor some 10 years ago, and in which my political career started.

Environmental concerns are of major interest to my constituents, particularly in Lullington heath, which regularly has the highest level of low-level ozone in the country. There is a considerable air pollution problem, and one local child in six suffers from asthma. I hope to be able to draw those matters to the Government's attention during my time in the House, and to argue for significant environmental advances. I welcome much of

today's Queen's Speech—indeed, having listened to Queen's Speeches since I was in short trousers, I can say that this was probably the first time that I have agreed with most of one—but I was sorry that it contained so little about the environment. I hope that that was an unfortunate omission rather than a reflection of future Government policy.

We need to recognise that the environment is at the heart of all decision making: unless we have sensible and constructive environmental policies, all the other policies that the Government have outlined today for investment in health and education will come to naught. We have to invest in good environmental protection.

I am also grateful to hear from my colleagues on the Labour Benches such strong advocacy of a freedom of information Bill. I, too, am sorry that that was missing from today's Queen's Speech and am worried because, the longer a Government operate without a freedom of information Bill, the more reluctant they will become to introduce such a measure.

Hon. Members may remember the "Spycatcher" episode in the 1980s when the then Government attempted to stop any newspaper in the country that wanted to publicise that book from doing so. Indeed, I am told that the Government even seized copies of *Pravda* when they arrived at Gatwick airport to prevent us from finding out about "Spycatcher", when the Russians themselves knew everything about it.

I am also told that 88 pieces of legislation make disclosure of information a criminal offence. I hope that the Government will review some of that legislation in the months and years ahead—earlier rather than later. The Sewerage (Scotland) Act 1968 is one such Act, which makes disclosure of information a criminal offence. There are many such nonsensical measures around, and I hope that the Government will examine them.

We have, I hope, a brand new start in politics. I welcome much of the Queen's Speech. I welcome the commitment that the Prime Minister gave this afternoon to govern for all of Britain. I hope that that is going to be reflected in action and in legislation. I hope that it will go some way to addressing the needs of those elements in society and in my constituency which have felt left out and unrepresented in recent times: the homeless, the poor, people in poor housing, perhaps in council estates, and people who do not feel that they have had a voice in Government in the past 18 years. I hope that measures will be introduced to help those who have not had a voice. I shall certainly support those measures if they do.

Let us ensure that this Parliament goes down in history as a reforming Parliament, and that it addresses all those issues that have been left unaddressed for so long, whether they be the needs of our regions in Scotland and Wales, the needs of people who have not had their voice heard, or the need for basic constitutional reform in other ways, such as through freedom of information. I hope that this Parliament will address those issues. If it does, I shall be pleased to be a Member of it.

7.12 pm

Mr. Frank Cook (Stockton, North): I am grateful to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to commend the hon. Member for Lewes (Mr. Baker) on an outstanding maiden speech. He observed all the conventions of the House, and he had diligently done his

[Mr. Frank Cook]

homework on his predecessor—which he had done in the election, anyway. He was aware of all the characteristics of his constituency.

His asides and interventions on previous speeches clearly showed that his initial nervousness was quickly leaving him, and that he was settling in, so I look forward with great pleasure to future contributions from the hon. Gentleman. I am pleased—indeed, privileged—because this is the first time in this Parliament that a Member has had the opportunity to congratulate another Member on a maiden speech. I am doubly pleased by that.

May I congratulate you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and express my pleasure at your appointment as First Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means? May I also register similar congratulations and appreciation on the appointment of the hon. Member for Saffron Walden (Sir A. Haselhurst) as chairman of that august body, and of the hon. Member for Central Suffolk and Ipswich, North (Mr. Lord) as the Second Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means?

I must apologise for my voice. The House may be interested to learn that, for some weeks now, I have had a combination of bronchitis, tracheitis and laryngitis, which culminated at a critical point in the middle of the campaign with campagnitis. I was consigned to bed for two weeks by my doctor, but could enjoy only six days, because I had to get up and take part in a public debate—where, although my voice was not very good, my logic was triumphant. My agent told me that, had I observed the doctor's advice and stayed in bed for a fortnight, my majority would have been 27,000 instead of 21,500. I am sure that there is a lesson there for everyone.

I commend my right hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman) and my hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland, South (Mr. Mullin) on their sterling contributions. I have heard a number of debates on the Queen's Speech, and their speeches were outstanding. They treated the House to a feast of wit and wisdom. I was doubly pleased because I did my early teacher training in Manchester and was a scholar—I have to say, a fairly poorly shod scholar—in a direct grant-aided Jesuit school in Sunderland, so I had a second-hand affinity with both of them. I only hope that, perhaps with another couple of years apprenticeship, I might be able to emulate the splendid standards that they displayed today. Both delivered speeches of outstanding merit.

The Leader of the Opposition displayed even more dignity today than he has demonstrated in the past, and that is considerable. The leader of the Liberal Democrats was as articulate as ever, but displayed his usual selective logic. Both leaders delivered a fairly standard election rant. We heard from them nothing new to add to what we heard from them on the interminable television broadcasts that bored me silly throughout the campaign—I was confined to bed, you must remember Mr. Deputy Speaker.

The Tories cannot have it both ways. They scaremonger about Labour intentions and the damage that we are going to do, and then complain that we have stolen all their policies. Both statements are totally inaccurate, but, even if they were not, they cannot have it both ways, so for goodness' sake let them wake up to the nonsense that has been spoken over so many months. If Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition do not realise the mistakes that they have

made in their campaigning tactics in the past two years, they are condemning themselves to a period of opposition almost as long as the Labour party had.

On television this morning, one Liberal Democrat spokesman, the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith), said that it was the Liberal Democrats' task and duty to ensure that the Prime Minister delivered on all his promises and commitments to the electorate. That sounded very good, but it is a load of twaddle, because only Labour Members can ensure that the Prime Minister and the new Labour party deliver on the commitments to the electorate.

The Prime Minister lived up to his usual exemplary standard today, not only in his prepared statements, but in his asides, which were devastating. It surprises me that some unfortunate Conservative Members continue to try to take him on.

To the Prime Minister I say that, from now on, we Labour Members have no excuse. There is nowhere for us to hide. We have made our commitments. We have stated our promises. We have insisted that the electorate keep a close watch on what we do, and we have no excuse. We have the majority with which to deliver, and we must deliver faithfully and openly on those commitments, but how we do so is the crucial consideration.

We have all experienced 18 years of legislation. Much of it was too hasty, much was harmful, and much was unnecessary. A considerable amount remains totally unused, and much is unworkable. In the process, Parliament's priceless procedures, which should foster movement towards consensus and pragmatic agreement, have been routinely and deliberately ignored, inhibited and, in consequence, sadly discredited. Now, the discharged Government responsible for that sorry debacle bleat pitifully at the Government's expressed determination to redress that situation with constitutional reform.

A news item on BBC Radio 4 reported a judge's advice to the jury as it retired to consider its verdict at the end of the trial of the boxer Nigel Benn. He said that there was no need for the jury to hasten the verdict by hurried determination. He said that they should deliberate with care. That advice should sit well on the shoulders of this House as it begins to consider the programme outlined in the Queen's Speech.

If we consider some of the instances when such deliberation was not exercised, my concerns will be clear. Hon. Members present at the time will remember the Child Support Bill and the agreement at the time that the absent father should be made to pay properly for the maintenance and upkeep of the forsaken children. That is a perfectly laudable motive and a praiseworthy objective. However, what we got was anything but that.

My personal assistant has files the length of one's arm on individual after individual who were faithfully complying with agreements reached in court under the due process of law, who were in constant contact with their children and were maintaining them and giving them gifts but who were sought out, penalised and hounded by the Child Support Agency. Sadly, many of them committed suicide. I am pretty good at lip reading because I am fairly deaf and I noticed an Opposition Member mouthing a reference to a certain part of the male anatomy, suggesting that what I am saying is nonsense.

I promise the House that what I say is true and, if that hon. Gentleman chooses to turn his head and look at some of his colleagues, he will see that they are indicating agreement.

The Child Support Bill was a perfect example of legislation introduced in haste, inadequately thought through, and poorly enforced. Restrictions were placed upon its enforcement which made the CSA more of a Treasury support agency. It is a perfect example of what I consider to be bad legislation. There are others, but I will mention only one more and that is the community charge—the poll tax. That was ill conceived and badly debated.

Incidentally, it supplies a perfect contradiction to the statements by the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood). If the leader whom he seeks to supplant delivered rant, I am afraid that he treated us to cant. His concern for Scottish affiliation was so strong that he did not protest at Caledonia having the singular privilege of having to suffer the iniquities of the poll tax a good 12 months ahead of the rest of the United Kingdom. His concerns for the West Lothian question at that time were significantly silent, yet now it has become an issue of prime importance.

The point that I want to ram home is that the new Labour Government must not strut blindly into repetition of such dismissive non-concern. The legislation we enact must be necessary, clearly understood, universally fair and, above all, enforceable. The poll tax was not; the Child Support Bill was unfair.

The Queen's Speech contains many very good proposals and, because they are good, it is all the more important for us to give them proper consideration. We must allow sufficient time and we must not use the guillotine as it was used in the past. We must not gag hon. Members as they have been gagged in the past.

I should like to comment on one or two of the good items in the speech. I do not know whether to start with the good news or the bad news—but perhaps the former. Some hon. Members will be pleased to hear that I shall be maintaining my opposition to the firearms legislation. I am not a shooter, although I hold the honorary position of pistol captain of the Palace of Westminster Rifle Club. Some people present, who have seen the results of my shooting, will confirm that I could never be a shooter, although I suppose it depends what one is shooting.

I shall continue my opposition because I think that the law will be unworkable and unenforceable, which will give the wrong impression to the people out there. We must take other measures.

I welcome the benefits that may come from the national lottery, although I do not subscribe to it myself and do not intend to. I am pleased that some means is to be found to put the capital receipts from housing sales to good effect. That is eminently sensible and we have been calling for it for ages. The proposals for a freedom of information Bill have been late in coming and we will be delighted to achieve it. The incorporation of the European convention on human rights is long overdue and most welcome.

I do not know how we shall seek to resolve the financial crisis of the United Nations. Perhaps it will be on the agenda for the meeting that has no agenda when President Clinton comes to visit Prime Minister Blair. I hope that it will, because it will be too good an opportunity to miss. I should like to be a fly on that wall.

The establishment of a Department for International Development is long overdue. Heaven knows, we need to give closer scrutiny to the aid that we give to third world nations. The decision on the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation is long overdue. That organisation has received much unwarranted criticism, although some may have been justified in the past. It is right that we should rejoin; if there is anything wrong with it, it is easier to resolve from within than without.

I am pleased that there will be measures dealing with the funding of political parties. It has always been a mystery to me how we manage to find so much money at election time. I will be interested to learn what members of the Conservative party have learnt about their funding.

I heard the right hon. Member for Wokingham ranting today about the fact that NATO had not been mentioned. I thought that he could not have read the Queen's Speech, because it states:

"My Government will ensure a strong defence based on the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation".

That is as it should be. By its very definition, that has to take into account our partnership with the United States and our European colleagues.

More important is the further commitment to

"include Russia in a wider security framework."

That is important because Russia is feeling demoralised in global terms. It is important that it should be given a role in international affairs commensurate with its strength, potential and standing. It is almost ashamed at having lost its powers, and it is important to bring it in and use the strength it still has as a means of creating a much stronger European collective defence architecture. There is a role to be played in partnership for peace.

The only sentence with which I take issue in the Queen's Speech is the one in which the Government state that they will

"retain strong armed forces, including the nuclear deterrent."

It will not surprise hon. Members to hear me repeat my conviction that all weapons of mass destruction—whether biological, chemical or nuclear weapons, or landmines, which are also weapons of mass destruction—are morally unacceptable. I am still an unrepentant and unreconstructed unilateral nuclear disarmer, and I profess that belief in all the international forums at which I represent the House—although I may be removed from that role:

The Queen's Speech mentions retaining strong armed forces, "including the nuclear deterrent". The very next sentence, however, states:

"Preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction will be a priority."

For the life of me, that contradiction is my one criticism of the Queen's Speech. I do not understand how we can include a nuclear deterrent in our "strong armed forces", yet set as a priority preventing the

"proliferation of weapons of mass destruction."

If we retain a nuclear deterrent, we will have to update it, which will probably mean increasing the number of multiple independently targeted re-entry vehicles.

The contradiction poses another problem. If we have a nuclear deterrent in our pocket, how will we argue with nations that do not have one, and convince them that they should not acquire one? It would be unreasonable and unjust to adopt that stance.

[Mr. Frank Cook]

I reiterate that, whatever important legislation our Government propose, it must be thought through and cautiously considered. Ultimately, the Government must be satisfied that the legislation has been carefully considered by listening to every party in the House and by not guillotining the debate, restricting argument or inhibiting comment. The Government should hear the debate, and then pass legislation that is the product of a true and genuine parliamentary process, which is based on some consensus. At the end of the process, hon. Members should say, "We have argued our differences. Now, for the good of the public, let us try to make it work." I think that we will do it.

7.31 pm

Mr. Robert Key (Salisbury): It is a pleasure to follow the speech of the unrepentant and unreconstructed hon. Member for Stockton, North (Mr. Cook). It is hard to imagine him losing his voice for even six days, but I am delighted that he has found it again to speak in this debate. Like him, I find the Queen's Speech something of a curate's egg. He will have to learn how to work in those situations on the Government Benches, as I will have to learn to work on the Opposition Benches.

I congratulate you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, on your appointment, and I know that you have the support of hon. Members from both sides of the House in performing your important role. I also thank my constituents for re-electing me for another term in the House. Like the hon. Member for Lewes (Mr. Baker)—whom I congratulate on an excellent maiden speech—my constituency goes back a long way in history. Moreover, I am relieved to say that my constituents take a long-term view.

Simon de Montfort was buried in Salisbury cathedral, and the first hon. Members from Salisbury were sent to the House in 1265. In that year, my constituency sent eight hon. Members to Parliament—two of whom came from Old Sarum, which is of some fame—although the map looked very different in those days. Wiltshire and Yorkshire were then the two most important counties in the country. Wiltshire sent 28 hon. Members to the House, and Yorkshire sent 29.

The Queen's Speech has much in it that I will be able to support. It has even more in it that I will not be able to support, and that I will attempt constructively to oppose. I will take a specific interest in some of the matters that the hon. Member for Stockton, North mentioned, including the terms of re-entry to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation.

I was the last United Kingdom UNESCO national commissioner. I was appointed by a Conservative Government, although my tenure in that office did not last very long before the then Prime Minister decided that it was time to withdraw from the organisation. I shall therefore take pleasure and care in scrutinising our re-entry.

The first matter that I should like carefully to deal with is constitutional change. I take a long view of the evolution of the British constitution, and I am painfully aware just how quickly the situation can change.

During the general election campaign, I was reminded that there are still people in my constituency who recall Mosley's blackshirts marching in Salisbury market

square. There were some very unpleasant undercurrents in the campaign, particularly when it came to discussion of European issues, which reminded me of some of the arguments and writings of Sir Oswald Mosley. Last year, I read much of what Mosley had to say. I caution the Government, in progressing rapidly down the road to devolution, to be careful not to stir up English nationalism, because, whenever it has been stirred up, it is the Scots and the Welsh who have lost out.

The Government should not believe that regional parliaments for the regions of England are the answer to the problem. The United Kingdom is a small, already well-governed nation. It is even over-governed in comparison with many nations, both in Europe and around the world. Above all, we must take care not to preside over the balkanisation of the United Kingdom, which is a very dangerous and not unimaginable scenario. I shall be taking careful note of the Government's progress on devolution.

Fresh from the hustings, I also see quite clearly that, if the Scots and the Welsh are to have referendums on breaking away from the United Kingdom, many Englishmen and women will also want one. We are all in the same club, because the United Kingdom is our United Kingdom. Scotland, like Wales, is an equal partner in the United Kingdom. Those arguments should be heard, and I will need some convincing if there is not to be a referendum in England.

Mr. Frank Cook: The hon. Gentleman used the phrase "breaking away" from the United Kingdom. If he reads the Queen's Speech, he will realise that it does not mention Scotland or Wales "breaking away" from the United Kingdom. There are references to regional government, but not to "breaking away". He should beware of falling into the same trap as the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood).

Mr. Key: I suspect that it would have to be quite a big trap to hold me. I will, however, take care on that point. Nevertheless, that argument has been deployed by some politicians north of the border with Scotland, and I shall take careful note of it.

Another issue that I shall be particularly keen to consider is changes to the national lottery. Mr. Deputy Speaker, you will forgive me if I feel slightly proprietorial about that legislation, because I was initially responsible for its passage. I recall very well that, during its passage, the Labour party fought tooth and nail against any suggestion that there should be any additionality, and specifically against the suggestion that any lottery money should be spent on education and health. It is a great irony that Labour has now included it in the Queen's Speech, and I shall very carefully be watching developments on the issue.

Surely the Government know that, when we were constructing the national lottery, we carefully considered whether it should be a private-sector, profit-making organisation, a charitable one, a quasi-national government organisation, or simply a Department. We ruled out making it a Department, because the previous national lottery was run by the Treasury, and the official who was responsible for it embezzled £24,000 of the money, which was never repaid and which subsequently led to the lottery's collapse.

However, we ruled out the non-profit-making route, for very good reasons. We had studied every lottery in the world, and we found that undoubtedly, the minute one put a lottery into the hands of the Government or a charitable organisation, it lost its sparkle and its revenue. In any country—but notably in Ireland—within five minutes of national lottery money being used in the health service, the Treasury would start chopping money off the health budget for good causes, charitable causes, capital equipment or special facilities. It would no longer make up the shortfall.

We should look again at the contract for running the national lottery—indeed, we said we would. When the contract nears the end of its term, we shall determine whether different regulations and legislation are needed. However, I will need some convincing that we should throw out the principle of a private sector operator, and I hope that the Government will think again on that.

I welcome some of the proposed changes. We must consider the role of the Office of the National Lottery, but we have the most successful national lottery in the world and we should not throw the baby out with the bathwater. Let us not forget that we introduced the national lottery not only because we believed that it was a good thing but because of the competition from other national lotteries, which were marketing themselves in this country. The Treasury, the charities and all the good causes were losing out to other national lotteries. We do not want that to happen again.

Finally, echoing some of the comments made by the hon. Member for Stockton, North, I express my concern about Labour's defence review. Yes, NATO was mentioned in the Gracious Speech, but during the whole election campaign, other than on one day, we heard no mention of Labour's defence plans. I do not know whether it will be a question of cheese-paring or salami-slicing.

Tragically, defence is now regarded as an important electoral issue in only about 40 constituencies—those with important defence procurement industries, those with military training areas, those that are traditional recruiting grounds for the regiments and those which have traditional ports or airfields. By and large, defence has ceased to be thought of as a first-tier national issue, yet it is. It is the most fundamental duty of any Government to ensure the defence of the realm, to deter threats, to defend freedom, to defend territorial integrity, to support the civil authorities, especially in countering terrorism, to promote the UK's wider security interests throughout the world, and to enhance freedom, democratic institutions and free trade.

The defence programme must therefore provide the greatest military capability within available resources. That term is crucial because any defence review must be capability-led, not Treasury-led. Will we simply see the gradual erosion of the defence budget, beyond the level envisaged by the Defence Select Committee, on which the hon. Member for Stockton, North and I served with my hon. Friend the Member for Romsey (Mr. Colvin), who is here today? The Committee put down a cross-party marker that there should be no further defence cuts. Whoever serves on the successor Defence Committee has a solemn duty to ensure that that is so, and, if there is a slippage, to tell the House pretty quick, because the House must care about that.

If the defence programme is to be capability-led, that implies that some of the traditional roles of the British military may be up for grabs. What will they be if it is capability-led? Are we going to give up anti-submarine warfare capability? Oh yes, one could probably scrap about 14 frigates and do away with about £4 billion or £5 billion—but, my goodness, the consequences will be very severe.

Are we talking about defence procurement? Where do we start? Shall we abandon the Tomahawk land attack missiles, or the Hercules C130 Js—the transport aircraft? Shall we cancel a few orders for the EH101 helicopters or extra Chinooks? What about the Apache attack helicopters, the improved SKYNET satellite telecommunications, the common new generation frigate programme with other countries in Europe? Will Eurofighter be scrapped? If we are considering a capability-led defence programme, one could argue that no capability need for it remains. What about those replacement maritime patrol aircraft, the whole question of heavy lift capability, or the air-launched stand-off anti-armoured weapons, which are on order? All those appear to be up for grabs.

It is causing uncertainty to the defence chiefs, the uniformed services, the enormous research organisations with their thousands of employees and the civilian work force on whom the uniformed military depend.

What about our training areas? A public inquiry is being held on Otterburn, with important implications for the Salisbury plain training area. What about our relations and training overseas with our partners either in the partnership for peace or NATO or the British Army Training Unit at Suffield in Canada? We need to be aware of what our capability and our relationships will be.

There was a grand announcement that more attention would be paid to Gulf war syndrome. I welcome that. The Defence Committee strongly criticised what had happened before, but I do not hear a word about any more resources to try to find out more about that.

What about defence medical services? What about the future provisioning of the Army? What about the Navy, Army and Air Force Institute contract, which was lost to Bookers? What about some of the issues raised by the Defence Committee at the end of the last Parliament, such as the future of compensation for our service men and women? What about the role of the Army Families Federation, supporting families in married quarters, and all the staff, wherever they may be in the world—the military people and civilians? What about the Soldiers, Sailors and Air Force Association? What about the military museums?

These issues are all wrapped up in that bland phrase, "Let us have a defence review." I have yet to be convinced that it is anything other than a euphemism for defence cuts—and that would be unacceptable to me and my constituents, I can assure the House.

I hope very much, therefore, that during the deliberation of the Gracious Speech and the busy time that we shall have in the next 18 months, the House will take time for consideration, and that, in their glee at an enormous majority, on which I give due congratulations, the Government do not forget that there are many people who, when they voted for the Government party, were not necessarily voting for the individual bits of their programmes. That is the important role of this Parliament.

[Mr. Key]

We must ensure that we carry out our duty as Opposition Members, whether we are Conservative Members who will soon be on the Government Benches again, or Liberal Members who are condemned to eternal opposition, whoever is in government. Either way, we must take our duties very seriously in view of the large majority that we face.

7.47 pm

Mr. David Kidney (Stafford): Mr. Deputy Speaker, as I rise to speak for the very first time, may I, as one of the newcomers, wish you well in your new post?

I represent the constituency of Stafford—as a result of boundary changes, not the same constituency that it was in 1992. However, the man who represented Stafford in the previous Parliament is still in the House—the hon. Member for Stone (Mr. Cash), who, I am pleased to see, has just rejoined us in the Chamber. He now represents the adjoining constituency. I congratulate him on his good judgment in standing for that seat, not Stafford.

Earlier today, I heard my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister speak of the hon. Member for Stone and other Conservative Members who are of the same view on matters European. In the constituency of Stafford, many people deeply respect the arguments that the hon. Member for Stone consistently advances, although I hasten to say that I do not agree with those arguments.

The constituency of Stafford is centred on the county town of the same name, a place which is rich in history, in the talent of its people and in the green and pleasant grounds that surround it. It is also an area of great communications, with the M6 hard by the town of Stafford, and it is a major stop on the west coast main line. When, eventually, later this year, the Eurostar trains venture beyond London, Stafford will be the only stop in Staffordshire for those services.

Unfortunately, some members of the public confuse Stafford with a great town called Stratford-on-Avon, and it is not unusual for tourists in Stafford to be disappointed to be unable to find there the birthplace of Shakespeare—although, happily, every summer at Stafford castle there is an open-air Shakespeare festival.

Stafford's literary connection with the House is best shown in the person of the great playwright, Richard Sheridan, who represented the town for 20 years or so in the 18th century. He spent his maiden speech defending himself against a complaint of bribing his electors—an experience which I am pleased not to be following. Unfortunately, Mr. Sheridan died in debt—another experience in which I hope not to follow him.

I have but one predecessor who was a Labour representative for Stafford—Mr. Stephen Swingle, who took part in the great landslide victory of 1945 and represented Stafford only until the following election in 1950. That is another example which I hope not to follow. Mr. Swingle bounced back in 1951, winning a by-election at Newcastle-under-Lyme, which he represented faithfully and loyally until his death in 1969, serving in Labour Governments in the 1960s, with responsibilities for transport, health and social security. To this day, his life and his service for the town are commemorated in Newcastle-under-Lyme in an annual Stephen Swingle memorial lecture.

I have sat through the whole of today's proceedings in the Chamber. I have thoroughly enjoyed the contributions of right hon. and hon. Members, but I invite them to look at the text of the Gracious Speech with different eyes. I ask them to consider the comment of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister about some of the reasons for the declining state of our society. Among those reasons, he mentioned the loosening of family ties. I invite hon. Members to measure the proposals in the Gracious Speech by their effects on families, and particularly on children. We representatives have a special responsibility to speak up for children. Understandably, we are in thrall to electors, but we also have a duty to represent those too young to vote.

Education is clearly the Government's priority for the coming term. We have a chance to improve the lives of all children. Their schooldays will be the best days of their lives if they receive a quality education. Surely ensuring smaller class sizes in the earliest years at school and improving school standards are the best ways to raise the quality of that education. Through education, we can break down the barriers to ensure opportunity for all—in work, in parenting or in citizenship.

The measures on law and order will also benefit children. They, too, are victims of crime—often silent victims. They will benefit from a greater feeling of security in their formative years by being brought up in safer communities. Those few who are young offenders will rightly be punished faster and earlier to ensure that not all children are labelled as troublemakers, harming their relationships with older members of the community.

The measures in the Gracious Speech on housing will also benefit all children, ensuring that they will have a place of shelter and refuge. I hope that we shall also have regard to ensuring freedom of choice in the kind of homes that children live in with their parents or guardians—whether those homes are owner-occupied, rented in the private sector, rented from what are now, in shorthand, called social landlords, or involve one of the many innovative types of tenure that have been developed somewhere between those categories. I hope that, as many hon. Members have suggested, the release of capital receipts held by local authorities will assist in ensuring that children are brought up in safe and secure homes, both through the building of new homes to rent by social landlords and through the renovation of homes that are presently too cold or damp.

Children benefit if their parents benefit. The grand issues that we have debated today—jobs, a successful economy and a safer and more co-operative world order—will benefit children. However, I believe that they will also benefit in their own right from the measures in the Gracious Speech that I have mentioned.

7.54 pm

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip-Northwood): I add my congratulations to those of other right hon. and hon. Members on your elevation to your new post, Mr. Deputy Speaker, along with my hon. Friends the Members for Central Suffolk and Ipswich, North (Mr. Lord) and for Saffron Walden (Sir A. Haselhurst), who is the Chairman of Ways and Means.

I was, perhaps somewhat condescendingly, going to observe that we have been privileged to hear outstanding speeches from the mover and seconder of the Loyal

Address—the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman) and the hon. Member for Sunderland, South (Mr. Mullin): They made speeches of originality, verbal distinction and wit from which hon. Members old and new could benefit. Clearly, the new Members needed no such example or instruction. The two new Members who have contributed this afternoon—the hon. Members for Lewes (Mr. Baker) and for Stafford (Mr. Kidney)—demonstrated rare talent. Both made succinct speeches, paying warm tributes to their predecessors, as is appropriate. I am sure that we shall hear many speeches of similar distinction from new Members in the days and weeks ahead.

While we are paying tributes, I must, as others have, pay particular tribute to the late Nicholas Baker, who was a brave and good servant of his constituents and of the House. I must also pay a special tribute to my great parliamentary friend and colleague, Sir Michael Shersby, the former Member for Uxbridge, who died but a few days ago. I could not have had a better parliamentary neighbour or a more loyal friend. I believe that only Michael could have held Uxbridge against the tidal wave of the swing to Labour in London north of the Thames.

He was, for me, the model parliamentarian—infinately courteous, diligent to the extreme and capable of taking endless pains on behalf of his constituents. Together with that remarkable attention to detail, he displayed a rare diversity of interests in this place. He was the president of the London Green Belt Council and championed the preservation of the environment of outer London. He was a member of the Public Accounts Committee and the Chairman of many Standing Committees. He was a spokesman for the Police Federation and chairman of the Falkland Islands group.

While we are paying tribute to those who have died, we should not forget the many who have lost their seats. I should like to single out one, who was also a parliamentary neighbour—Dr. Rhodes Boyson, former Member for Brent, North. He was an incomparably distinguished parliamentarian, inimitable in every way.

The best part of the Queen's Speech was the start—the royal beginning, if I may put it that way—in which Her Majesty gave a summary of her gracious programme of hospitality to foreign heads of state. The President of Brazil is to come in the latter part of this year and the Emperor and Empress of Japan are coming next year. Her Majesty also referred to her forthcoming visit to India and Pakistan, presumably to commemorate the 50th anniversary of their independence in August. We are, indeed, fortunate to have as head of state a monarch who is so assiduous and who fulfils, on behalf of the nation, important responsibilities in foreign affairs which are crucial to the dignity of our country and encourage trade and good relations between nations—not least in the subcontinent where there is a dispute about the former princely state of Jammu and Kashmir which has, unfortunately, yet to be resolved.

Moving on to the governmental part of the Queen's Speech, I am afraid to say that the quality begins quickly to deteriorate. There is a brief sentence and then one moves on to a thoroughly bad paragraph in which we find a proposal of supreme socialist vindictiveness aimed against children who cannot help the twin accidents of their birth—that they are clever, but that their families are poor.

Private schools benefit from having pupils from a variety of backgrounds, and poorer pupils benefit from the environment of private schools which enables them to make new friends outside their normal social circle. It is therefore a thoroughly retrograde step to do away with the assisted places scheme, as the Government propose.

If the Government want to do something useful in education and at relatively little cost, they should review the Greenwich judgment to prevent children from flooding across borough boundaries in London to the detriment of the ability of parents in my constituency and other constituencies affected to send their children to the local school of their choice.

Like the hon. Member for Lewes (Mr. Baker), who has now left the Chamber, I bitterly regret the fact that there was no mention of environmental protection in the Queen's Speech. It is an issue of enormous importance, especially to outer London and the suburbs of our big cities.

Allowing local authorities to keep the capital receipts from the sale of council houses, as is proposed in the Queen's Speech, sounds good. The proposal is to be welcomed inasmuch as it will enable the renovation of dilapidated properties, but if, as has happened in my borough of Hillingdon, it encourages the development by a socialist local authority of large-scale social housing on recreation grounds, on any open space that can be found, on playing fields, on green chain designated areas and even in green-belt areas, it could be thoroughly retrograde and deeply damaging to the quality of life on the periphery of our big cities. I regret that the Government did not mention in the Queen's Speech the importance of stimulating the private rented sector to meet our undoubted housing needs.

In the general election campaign, one theme recurred time and again, on the doorstep and in public meetings, in a way that no other issue in my recollection of eight general election campaigns has recurred—except perhaps the issue of immigration in the 1970 election. The issue was, of course, our relationship with Europe. It is an issue which cannot be shirked and which we must confront. We must recognise that there is, in principle, a big divide between the instinctive attitudes of the Labour party and those of the Conservative party.

The Prime Minister took pride in the fact that the Government would continue to arrogate to themselves sole responsibility for justice and home affairs, for foreign affairs and for defence. Vetoes in those areas of policy would be retained by our country. That is well and good, and appropriate, but the steady accretion of powers by Europe in other areas will go on and has already been accelerated by the advent to power of this Labour Administration. The instincts and inspiration behind the social chapter may sound fine, but social policy is properly an area in which, according to our traditions and our ways of doing things, we should be able to decide, as we should in industrial and employment policy.

Although there is a mention of the common fisheries policy and of the common agricultural policy, there is no commitment to what will be essential—the return of powers in those areas to this nation. The resources of our seas are properly ours, and we must understand that the common agricultural policy is not sustainable and not compatible with the objective in the Queen's Speech of enlargement of the European Union. We can have the one,

[Mr. John Wilkinson]

but not the other—not easily, not effectively and not smoothly. We need to bring the countries of central and eastern Europe into a relationship of community with us in the west at the earliest possible date. We entered—did we not?—a European community. It is to a community of nations that we should return and we should set aside the goal of ever-closer union because that goal will never be achievable and will bring with it fundamental stresses and strains. A fundamental issue in that context will shortly be the single currency.

I have a brief observation on referendums and the constitutional development of our country which the Government propose in the Queen's Speech. We are to have referendums for Scotland, for Wales and for the governance of London—I refer to the proposed Greater London authority and the directly elected mayor for the capital. There is a big omission, is there not? Why are we to have no referendum on our relationship with the European Union, which is the most important constitutional development in this country and which is changing apace in a way that many British people find wholly undesirable and over which they have no say? We had the extraordinary spectacle of a political party standing in the general election on that one issue and securing a significant share of votes, especially in seats that proved marginal and where a change of party representation occurred.

We should have the proposed referendums; I am a democrat and I welcome them. If it is the wish of the electorate of London to have a Greater London assembly and a directly elected mayor, well and good. I look forward to getting Conservative majority representation in the Greater London assembly and to having a Tory mayor for the whole of London.

Furthermore, I urge the Government, before it is too late and before tension has built up too much in our body politic, to think again about a referendum on our relationship with the European Union. It should not be just on the narrow matter of the single currency; it should not be just an endorsement of a decision already taken by the Government and by Parliament. It should be on the fundamentals of our relationship. Do we wish to be in, do we wish to be out, or do we wish to have a relationship of free trade only?

My right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) clearly explained the instinct of this Labour Government. Of course, we wish the Government well in the crusade on which they are embarked. We all listened with great attention to the somewhat evangelistic and moralistic tone of the Prime Minister's speech.

However, the fact is that the Government have started off extremely undemocratically. First, they have not allowed Parliament to have a say on the status of the Bank of England and its increased control over monetary policy. Secondly, there is the Government's attitude to questions and thirdly, there is the fundamental question of a referendum. We appreciate the referendums in Scotland, in Wales and in London, but one more referendum is required—on our relationship with the European Union.

8.9 pm

Mr. Brian White (Milton Keynes, North-East): First, let me pay tribute to Sir Michael Shersby who was my parents' Member of Parliament for a number of years and mine when I lived in that constituency as a child.

As my predecessor, Peter Butler, was the last Member of the 1992 intake to make his maiden speech, I thought that I would try to get in on the first day. At the count, I praised Peter for the way in which he had represented Milton Keynes, North-East, and I reiterate that today I was a good constituency Member for the people of Milton Keynes, but his Government let him down.

I am not the first Labour Member to represent North Buckinghamshire. The previous two were Captain Crawley in 1945 and a certain Mr. Maxwell in 1950. I assure my hon. Friends that I do not intend to emulate either of them.

Milton Keynes is a fast growing city in perhaps the fastest growing part of the country. It is also an environment city with some 19 million trees and a door-to-door recycling service which collects from everyone in the city. It has high-technology companies such as Stewart Racing, which I congratulate on an excellent result at Monaco last weekend. It also has many companies, such as Abbey National. Until a couple of weeks ago, I designed computer systems for Abbey National. I do not know whether it is better for me to be working here or designing there.

My constituency includes major rural areas. One of the key issues of the election campaign was the impact of the European Union on farming. It is interesting to reflect that the previous two Tory Members representing the area had considerably different solutions to rural problems. My constituency includes Olney, which has an annual pancake race. Milton Keynes is also home to the Open University, which is the proudest creation of a Labour Government, after the national health service. It is an example for the rest of the country, as it provides a university for industry and will serve us well in future.

Milton Keynes is different from many parts of the country in that it has always been a place of innovation. The public and private partnerships there could be emulated elsewhere.

Until recently, I was an Opposition member of North Buckinghamshire county council's education committee and therefore, I am delighted that the Queen's Speech makes education a high priority. A test of whether the Labour Government achieve their objectives will be whether they deliver on education. It has to be the highlight of the parliamentary Session, and we have to deliver.

Milton Keynes is unique in that new primary and secondary schools are being created. One of the most shameful acts of the Conservative Government was that they refused to allow a secondary school in my constituency to go ahead while allowing a grammar school to proceed; however, that school will not go ahead because it failed to gain the necessary planning permissions. It is critical that new schools continue to be built for all children. I welcome the scrapping of nursery vouchers, while making nursery education a high priority.

The crime and disorder legislation proposed in the Queen's Speech will be critical. Last weekend, an old couple aged 95 who live a couple of doors away from my home were robbed for the third time in as many months. Such incidents occur in all our towns and cities and they have to be stopped. That is why I applaud the proposals to speed up the criminal justice system and start to make improvements.

I also applaud the proposals in respect of the capital receipts that many councils have been unable to use. At last we will be able to give people decent housing.

This is the first Queen's Speech in a very long time with which I agree, and it gives me real pleasure to say that. I welcome the proposed White Paper on freedom of information. A Bill would have been better, but a White Paper will allow us to start to change the culture of government. As a politician, I have always argued that we should have a more open society and that we should change our procedures to allow more public access. I hope that the freedom of information White Paper will lead us to that end. I hope to contribute to the workings of the House so that we can have a reforming Parliament of which we can all be proud.

8.14 pm

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby): First, I congratulate you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, on your appointment. The job of Deputy Speaker is largely an unsung task. You spend many hours—perhaps some of the less interesting midnight hours—in the House. I congratulate you and your colleagues and pay tribute to the work of your predecessors, three of whom are no longer in the House. They were always extremely helpful to Back Benchers such as me, and I am sure that you will be the same.

I also congratulate the new Member for Milton Keynes, North-East (Mr. White) on his speech and on his courage in making his maiden speech on the first day of the Queen's Speech debate. I believe that one of his predecessors in Buckinghamshire, who represented the area before Milton Keynes was created—the late, lamented Robert Maxwell—also made his maiden speech on the day of the Queen's Speech. I am not sure what analogies should be drawn from that, so I shall draw none. I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his speech and his courage and I wish him well in the House.

The House of Commons is a courteous place. We probably disagree profoundly on a number of issues, but it is important that we observe the courtesies of the House. If we did not do so, the whole place would grind to a halt. I am sure that the hon. Member for Milton Keynes, North-East will forgive me when I say that I liked his predecessor, I regret his absence and I hope that he will be back after the next election.

I should also like to thank the constituents of Blaby for returning me at the general election less than two weeks ago. I did not achieve the large majority that I had last time, but I hope to build it up again in the near future. My majority was 25,000; it is now 6,500, but, God willing, it will rise towards 25,000 again.

Mr. Cash: And it will be well deserved.

Mr. Robathan: I thought that a majority of 25,000 was well deserved. It was going to fall because of the boundary changes, but 6,500 was a lower majority than I had expected.

Of course we welcome Her Majesty making the Gracious Speech, although we may not welcome everything in it. Of course I agree, as will all hon. Members, that all Governments govern for the benefit of the entire nation, and to suggest that only the present Government will do so is absurd. The Conservatives governed not always 100 per cent. correctly, but to the best of our ability for everyone in the nation—rich and poor, Scots, Welsh, Irish and English. I recall that it was a Labour Chancellor, now a Labour peer, who said that he

would squeeze the rich until the pips squeaked. That can hardly be termed governing for the benefit of the whole nation as even the rich are part of the nation—*[Interruption.]*—including Robert Maxwell and one or two Labour Members.

Some of the Prime Minister's policies embody rather soggy populism. The hon. Member for Stockton, North (Mr. Cook), who spoke earlier, would agree with me about the Bill to outlaw all handguns. I have probably fired more rounds of pistol ammunition than most hon. Members. I find it rather boring and I cannot imagine why anyone would want to spend a Saturday afternoon blating away with a pistol. I can think of a thousand different things that I would rather do, including going to a football match—although only just. However, 50,000 people enjoy firing pistols on a Saturday afternoon. It is strange that we should wish to ban their sport. They do no harm and they enjoy it. The fact that we do not does not mean that we should ban it. Furthermore, we are banning an Olympic sport, which means that we shall be discounted in the running for not only pistol shooting but—I think—the modern pentathlon. That is to be regretted.

Why are the Government banning handguns? It is a populist gesture for cheap headlines. Although, of course, we all have the utmost sympathy with the bereaved parents in Dunblane, police estimates suggest that there are up to 4 million illegally held firearms in this country. Every week we read in local newspapers such as the *Leicester Mercury*—or whatever the local newspaper is in Buckinghamshire—that some shooting has taken place with an illegally held firearm. The worry is not the legally held firearms of people who wish to shoot pistols on a Saturday afternoon but illegally held firearms.

I regret to tell people who believe that all madmen will be discounted by taking away legally held pistols that an expert, or indeed somebody with a little knowledge, can create more carnage than that created at Dunblane with two gallons of petrol and a battery. Although I hope that such carnage is not created, that is the truth. A more august person than I referred to cricket bats, which is particularly apt in the debate on the Queen's Speech. It is true that there are all sorts of ways in which children and others may be attacked; one does not need a legally held firearm.

The Queen's Speech also included the point that, having already signed up to the European convention on human rights, the new Government will incorporate it in British law. However much we might disagree, every hon. Member is keen on justice and the rights of citizens and of the individual. This country is free. It has been more free than almost any country in Europe throughout this century. The measure may paradoxically weaken the justice that one finds in British courts. The European Court of Human Rights will presumably have constitutional legitimacy in this country.

In 1950, Britain was one of the original signatories to the European convention on human rights. Indeed, we set it up in the aftermath of the second world war when there was a need to state that human rights had to be paramount. It was set up as the cold war was starting and the iron curtain was being erected. We need no lessons in human rights from many of today's signatories to the European convention. Although I respect many of the new countries, such as Slovakia, they have but a short history of freedom and respect for human rights.

[Mr. Robathan]

One judge in the European Court of Human Rights is from Bulgaria. I think that Bulgarian human rights leave a little to be desired. Croatia is about to become part of the court. As those of us who have studied the war in the former Yugoslavia will know, Croatia has not emerged with its hands clean. The measure seems to be another gesture to the single-issue brothers and sisters out there, and will benefit neither this country nor its people.

Another major plank of the Queen's Speech concerns the referendums on devolution. Scots may really want their own Parliament. I am not a Scot and cannot say. I am not sure that they will want their own Parliament, now that there are so many Scots on the Government Front Bench. I see just one in his place at the moment. Scots account for about half the new Cabinet and, indeed, for a large majority of the seats in Scotland. People might say that there is already a Scottish Government in Westminster, so why should there be a need for a Scottish Parliament? Scots may nevertheless want their own Parliament. I regret that and will fight against it.

The Minister for Education and Industry, Scottish Office (Mr. Brian Wilson): Does the hon. Gentleman understand that, in order to sustain his excellent thesis, there has to be a permanent Labour Government?

Mr. Robathan: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that suggestion. He should cast his mind back, young as he might be, to the 1950s, when more than 50 per cent. of Scots voted for the Conservatives. He might find that again in four or five years' time—who knows?

We are told that the Scots—as well as the Welsh—are a nation, and I am very happy to believe that. Surely, if the Scots are a nation, all members of the nation should have a vote in a referendum. I am not in any way criticising the hon. Members for Coventry, South (Mr. Cunningham) and for Leeds, East (Mr. Mudie) or my right hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) and my hon. Friend the Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox)—they are all very Scottish people. Should not they too have a vote? They are surely part of a Scots nation. I suggest that, since they were born and raised in Scotland, they have more right to vote in some referendum than, for instance, the hon. Member for Dunfermline, West (Ms Squire), who—I think—would always claim to be English.

We remember Lord Callaghan, the previous Labour Prime Minister—a great success he was, too. Should he not have a vote in some referendum on a Welsh Assembly? My father, who is still alive, was born in Llandaff. Why should the Under-Secretary of State for Wales, the hon. Member for Neath (Mr. Hain), be more a member of a Welsh nation than my father? There is great illogicality in the argument.

There is talk in the Queen's Speech of governing for the benefit of the whole nation, yet the proposed Assembly and Parliament will divide the nation. The British are a nation. As I look around the House, I see that we are all one nation. I certainly consider myself British before I consider myself English. I am going to Scotland for the Whitsun recess—God willing we have one. Scotland is part of the nation of which I am a member. I do not believe that devolution will improve the

nation—quite the contrary. People in Britain, not those in Scotland and Wales, should have a vote in referendum.

If we were to put up a sign saying, "Scots Out" would quite rightly be criticised for racialism, yet when I last drove along the motorway from Edinburgh airport towards Linlithgow, I saw big signs saying, "Eng Out". In some ways, Scottish nationalism has become respectable. It should not be. It is as nasty, petty-minded, mean-minded, small-minded and racist as anything the British National party comes up with.

Education is also a major plank of the Queen's Speech. I wish the Government well. I applaud almost everything that they have said in the Queen's Speech on education. They are returning to the old-fashioned three Rs. The Chancellor of the Exchequer mentioned discipline twice on Radio 4 this morning. I was so glad to hear a Labour Member talking about discipline.

What has Labour education policy meant in a lifetime? Out went old-fashioned learning, the three Rs and school discipline, and in came child-centred education—whatever that means—open-plan classrooms and the rowdiness that one gets now, which are the politics and policies of the left. In Leicestershire in the early 1970s, I am told that, when the county council moved briefly and sadly to the Labour party, the first act of Labour-controlled education authority was to abolish school uniform. There was no consultation. Now, so many schools are bringing school uniform back for all sorts of good reasons.

Such politically correct policies and claptrap are damaging to education. Teachers, of whom there may be some on the Government Benches and some sitting behind me, said, "Call me Jack, call me Jill." To that I would say, "Call me Jack, call me Jill, call me Tony." Lack of respect for authority has been bred in our schools. Are we to believe that, after all the harm done by their predecessors in the 1960s and 1970s, the new Labour Government will restore our education to the position which it ought to be—to the position it was in when I was a child?

During the election campaign, I met people who had such closed minds. They said to me, "I am a teacher. I must vote Labour." That is very distressing. Teachers are meant to broaden the minds of our young. The best primary schools that I have visited in my constituency since becoming a Member of Parliament have always said that they are old-fashioned and have, in their words, rejected the trendy ideas of the 1960s.

Such ideas were of the left and have harmed the education of so many children; indeed, they are still doing so in places such as Islington. If they are not harming education, why has the Prime Minister taken his child out of an Islington school and sent him to wherever he has sent him? Why has the Secretary of State for Social Security sent her child to a grammar school? Everyone must ask that question. I wish the Government well in education. Time will tell; perhaps they will do better than the Conservatives did. We shall watch.

The lack of discipline and direction in schools is closely linked to juvenile offenders. I wish the Government well in their determination to crack down on juvenile offenders, something which the Conservative Government tried to do for some years, without any support from the Labour party.

I think that I am the only Member of the House who served in the Gulf war as a member of the armed forces. I do not believe that there is such a thing as Gulf war syndrome. I think that there is organophosphate poisoning and there may be other illnesses as well. I welcome more research, but I caution the Government that just because people who served in the Gulf are ill does not mean that they are ill because they served in the Gulf.

The hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Mrs. Kennedy) may wish to tell the Ministry of Defence that I am happy to help in any inquiry. I heard the Minister for the Armed Forces say that he wanted to get service men from the Gulf through the doors of the Ministry of Defence. I will come.

Mr. John Home Robertson (East Lothian): Does the hon. Gentleman want a job?

Mr. Robathan: That is kind of the hon. Gentleman, but no, not on this occasion.

The defence review has been made much of. Three years ago we had a defence review called "Front Line First". The Labour party's instinct is to oppose greater spending on the armed forces. Its instinct is to cut defence spending. I suffered for five years as a member of the Army under the previous Labour Government. The House should note that the armed forces will not benefit from this defence review. I fear that, as night follows day, their numbers will be cut.

Mr. Home Robertson: That is a bit much coming from the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Robathan: I have never cut anything in defence—not willingly, anyway.

The Labour party won the election with a smaller percentage of votes than the Conservative Government in 1992. Nevertheless, it has a mandate. However, it does not have an overwhelming mandate to destroy the United Kingdom and its traditions, or to alter our lives beyond recognition. I congratulate the Government. The British people have the right to choose their Government. The Labour Government will have a limited tenure. They are tenants; they do not have the freehold, as the previous Conservative Government found out only 10 days ago.

Already the Prime Minister—or Tony, as we must call him—is acting as a bit of a dictator. He is but one of 659 Members of Parliament. I found his behaviour during the election campaign disappointing. I use that word advisedly, because his allegation that the Conservative party planned to privatise the state pension was not true and he knew it to be not true. The same applies to the scares about VAT on food and the NHS. They were disappointing. That must cast a shadow over what, to quote many of the newspapers, is a new Camelot.

Twenty years ago almost to the day, the last Labour Prime Minister appointed his 40-year-old son-in-law ambassador in Washington. That was an astonishing act of nepotism, which would rightly be condemned in a Conservative Prime Minister. The Prime Minister has begun by appointing the man who introduced him to his wife as Lord Chancellor and an old flatmate as Solicitor-General. I should have thought that among the 400-odd Labour Members of Parliament there must surely be someone who is capable of being Solicitor-General without appointing a chum.

If I sat on the Government Benches, which I do not, I would be worried, but I congratulate the new Government. They have the country in trust for the whole nation and for future generations. They should not harm it. They should be judged by their achievements and their actions and by the effect that they have on the United Kingdom.

8.33 pm

Mr. Philip Hope (Corby): As the Labour and Co-operative Member of Parliament for Corby, I am delighted to be able to make my maiden speech on this first day of debate on the Loyal Address on the Queen's Speech of the new Labour Government.

The Co-operative party is a sister party of the Labour party and I shall make it my business to pursue the ideals and practicalities of co-operation in terms of both legislative and wider support for the co-operative movement.

My predecessor, William Powell, was a hard-working Member of Parliament who paid particular attention to individual constituents' problems. He fully lived up to the standards that he set himself.

The Corby constituency is unique. It is a combination of the urban town of Corby and the rural area of east Northamptonshire, which contains many villages and the market towns of Oundle, Thrapston, Raunds and Irthlingborough. Corby itself is a former steel-producing town. It still has a tube manufacturing plant employing nearly 1,000 people. I am concerned at today's announcement of the loss of 134 jobs at that tube-making plant, and I shall seek reassurances from British Steel that steel tube production in Corby will continue to have a solid future.

As many hon. Members may also know, Corby has a large Scots community. In many ways, the spirit of Scotland is present, strong and proud. Only last weekend, the Caledonian Club football team reached the Wembley cup final of the inter-club national football competition, putting Corby on the map in a big way.

Corby and east Northamptonshire has a growing local economy. I pay tribute to Corby's borough council for its tremendous work in attracting inward investment, building local community organisations and creating real optimism for the future in a town that has suffered badly for many years.

The constituency also has unique features and attractions for economic growth. The town has a willing work force and, as a result of the closure of the steel-making plant, land is available for development. We have superb road links east, west, north and south, and we have possibly the first, and unique, road-rail interchange in Eurohub, which allows mile-long trains carrying 300 cars at a time to travel all the way from Corby to Paris, thereby developing and improving Corby as an inland port for imports and exports.

It is ironic that we can move freight all the way from Corby to Paris in about four hours, but do not have a passenger rail link from Corby to Kettering, the nearest Midland Main Line railway station. I shall be making it my business to see if we can put that right in order to give Corby a further economic asset.

A major priority must be to build on Corby's tremendous strengths so that it can achieve a high-wage, high-skill, local economy which is prosperous and can provide genuine economic opportunities for all.

[Mr. Philip Hope]

However, not surprisingly after 18 years of Conservative government, the constituency continues to have problems. In the rural areas, there is a complete absence of any real public transport. We need and look forward to innovative transport packages to deal with the problems faced by the many people who live in poverty and social isolation in rural areas. Transport will play a key part in solving their problems and meeting their needs.

In Corby, we have the problem of unscrupulous employment agencies which offer people temporary employment and zero-hour contracts with no insurance, pension, sick pay, training or job security. Young people aged 19 stand on the streets of Corby waiting for the agency bus to take them to a factory which, if it has no work, will simply tell them to get back on the bus and go home. That is no way for young people to start a working life. I shall be pushing for our fair employment proposals to ensure that unscrupulous employment agencies are fully controlled.

The national minimum wage announced in the Queen's Speech will be a major plank of security for young people who so often find themselves exploited.

I shall also seek to deal with recent problems associated with gas supplies; 5,000 households recently found their supply cut off when a subcontractor for Anglian Water managed, spectacularly, to drill through their water and gas mains in one dig. The Lodge Park and Shire Lodge estates in Corby were completely flooded, with water coming out of people's gas cookers. It was astonishing, and it took nearly 12 days for some people to be reconnected. An emergency was declared, and the county council, the borough council and the voluntary organisations, including the British Red Cross and the Women's Royal Voluntary Service were superb in dealing with it.

The problem we have now is getting fair compensation for people who were without hot water, hot food or any heating for up to 12 days. The announcement that British Gas will pay only £100 to every household is not good enough. We need to fight for better compensation.

Another local concern in Corby is the recent outbreak of legionnaire's disease. There have been 23 victims, and one person died this February. This is not a problem only for Corby, but a national problem. We must consider how we will prevent and control the legionella disease. It is a hidden problem that, in the next few months, will need much attention. I am delighted to see in the Queen's Speech that attention will be paid to public health. We have a new Minister for public health. I suspect that we will start work on the issue urgently in the next few days.

The good news for Corby and east Northamptonshire in the Queen's Speech is also the emphasis on education. I have visited many schools in the past few weeks, as I am sure have other hon. Members. I have visited schools throughout the constituency, both primary and secondary. The governors and staff of those schools cannot wait for some of the measures in today's Queen's Speech to be implemented. The abolition of the nursery voucher scheme raised a cheer in one staff room that I went to visit. It will be abolished so that we can create common sense and a planned approach to nursery provision for all four-year-olds.

How desperately smaller class sizes are needed in Corby, as are higher standards in all our schools. Taking 250,000 young people off the dole and into jobs, education and training will have enormous benefits for the young people in Corby, who genuinely feel that they have been dumped on the scrap heap by the previous Government. They look forward to the opportunities that we will be able to bring them. All those measures mentioned and highlighted in the Queen's Speech will be of direct benefit to schools in the Corby constituency. It will make a difference and it will make things better.

I look forward to representing the interests of all the peoples and all the communities of Corby and east Northamptonshire with commitment and enthusiasm. I believe that I am unique in being able to say that the people of Corby constituency were the only people in the country who actually voted for Hope for the future.

8.42 pm

Mr. David Amess (Southend, West): I rise to address the House for the first time as the newly elected Member of Parliament for Southend, West. I congratulate you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, on your election—

Mr. Home Robertson: What about Basildon?

Mr. Amess: I will come to that in a moment, but before so doing I wish to pay tribute to the two maiden speeches that I have heard this evening.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, you and I plus one other colleague were elected to this House some 14 years ago. There was a large Conservative majority at the time. I remember only too well the occasion of my maiden speech. There was a packed House. The debate was on the rate capping Bill. I followed my right hon. Friend the Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Sir E. Heath). I was given advice on how to make my maiden speech by the former Prime Minister.

Whoever gave the hon. Members for Milton Keynes, North-East (Mr. White) and for Corby (Mr. Hope) advice on how to make their maiden speeches, they were both splendid. We welcome the tribute paid by the hon. Member for Milton Keynes, North-East to our former colleague Peter Butler. Throughout the campaign, the hon. Gentleman certainly had a good grasp of local issues. I congratulate him on his speech.

The hon. Member for Corby made a fluent and forthright speech. I will observe the conventions on this occasion, but I am afraid to say that I did not exactly agree with his analysis of the political situation. It is clear that the hon. Gentleman will bring great fluency to future debates in the House. He feels things passionately, and I am very much in favour of conviction politicians. He certainly made an excellent maiden speech and I wish him well in the future. He also praised our former hon. Friend, whom he defeated.

The hon. Member for East Lothian (Mr. Home Robertson) mentioned Basildon. Let me put it on record that I am the first and last Member of Parliament for Basildon. On three occasions I was proud to be returned to serve my constituency of Basildon, and I did so for 14 years. On each occasion, my vote increased and the percentage of my vote increased. My former constituency is now represented by two Members of Parliament—one Conservative and one Labour. I wish those two Members of Parliament well in serving their constituents.

We still have many friends in Basildon, and I intend to keep my links with it—it is where our five children were born. I shall watch carefully future comments in the House about my former constituents.

It was with great humility that, some two years ago, I was chosen as the candidate for Southend, West. The constituency had been represented for four decades by Lord Channon. For more than 100 years, the constituency was represented by the Guinness family and the Iveagh family. It was well served by a number of Members of Parliament. My wife was born in the area and comes from the area. Without wishing to copy anything that the Labour party has to say, for my wife it is very much an occasion for her coming home.

The constituency is made up of seven wards—Bellfairs, Blenheim, Chalkwell, Eastwood, Lea, Prittlewell and Westborough. The issues in Southend, West are somewhat different from those that I came across in my former constituency, which was a new town. Southend, West has a coast. There are fishing issues. I pledged on election night to campaign immediately on four issues. On Friday, I shall detain the House on the first: my pledge to save Leigh fire station and ensure that Essex fire protection service is properly funded—something that the Labour and Liberal coalition on Essex county council has never done.

Secondly, houses in multiple occupation have made an unfortunate impact in Southend, West. I intend to challenge the local authority to ensure that the excellent legislation of the former Government is followed and that the increasing proliferation of HMOs stops in Southend, West. The third of my four pledges is to do everything I possibly can to attract investment into the town. It is through new investment and increasing job opportunities that we can offer real hope, especially to young people, in Southend, West.

My fourth pledge is to work with sensible women and men to establish Southend as the premier seaside resort in the country. One or two other hon. Members may challenge that, but that is my pledge.

Before I get on to the Queen's Speech, I wish to share with the House one or two thoughts about the general election campaign nationally and locally. Nationally, it was a rotten general election campaign. It was not a campaign with which any Member returned to this House could be pleased. The issues were not debated, they were fudged. We wasted the first two weeks arguing about particular matters. In the rest of the campaign, we did not get down to the nitty-gritty of what the general election campaign should be about. Never mind what the Government may say about the Conservative party; that general election campaign did the House no credit whatever.

There is a huge Government majority, and if we want this place to be serious again, the attendance tonight is somewhat disappointing. Although we have only 164 seats, there are Conservatives here, and also an Ulster Unionist colleague, the hon. Member for Belfast, South (Rev. Martin Smyth). I had hoped to see more Labour Members in the Chamber on day one. *[Interruption.]* I am sorry if hon. Members shake their heads at that. This is the place where we were elected to serve, and I think that the debate should be taken back into the Chamber.

The general election campaign was rotten. Now I shall say something about the campaign locally. Personally, I have been to hell and back. I did not much like hell, and I am glad to be back here. In Basildon, it was the Labour party that I fought, and I have no time for the Labour party; but in Southend, West I fought mainly the Liberal party.

The Liberals are not here this evening, in spite of having doubled their numbers. Never have I had such a wicked and poisonous personal campaign directed at me. The Liberal candidate was a woman, and she and her henchmen were obsessed with me as an individual. Every day, the Liberals printed rubbish about me, including photographs. They did not discuss the issues at all; all their material was about me as the candidate for Southend, West. It was a poisonous, wicked campaign, frightening people with the suggestion that we wanted to stop their pensions. There were lies morning, noon and night.

Then came the count. In my former constituency we used to declare in just over an hour, but in Southend, West we declared at about 6am, having had a bloody campaign. The returning officer said, "Look, you have won, but there is a discrepancy of 120 between the number of counterfoils and the number of ballot papers. Are you prepared to see your vote reduced by 120?"

My wife was almost at boiling point by then, so I said, "You are asking me to behave like a gentleman, mister returning officer, aren't you? You want all the staff to go home?" I then shook the returning officer's hand and reluctantly agreed to his suggestion, but within a few moments the Liberals were pawing all over our votes and saying that they wanted to go through them.

The Liberal campaign was a disgrace—and what angered me was the hypocrisy of the leader of the Liberal party. Nationally, he talked about Punch and Judy shows and said, "Oh, we don't want this battle between the Labour and Conservative parties; we're above all that," but locally the Liberal campaign was absolute dirt.

There was no integrity in the local campaign, and I hope that we in this House will not let the Liberal party get away with that sanctimonious platform any more. It is no good their saying on the national platform that they are above party politics if at local level they are the experts in dirt.

I did not especially enjoy the Gracious Speech. I could not find anything in it that I could support. I became a Member of Parliament for the first time on the same day as the Prime Minister and the leader of the Liberal party, and although there are many people who do not agree with anything that I say, at least I still hold the same views and values as I did 14 years ago.

When we listen to the leaders of the other two parties, we realise that they have changed their views on everything—not out of conviction, but because they used to lose elections. When we listen to the Gracious Speech, we realise what a disgrace that is, and I have underlined several quotations from it.

The first is:

"My Government intend to govern for the benefit of the whole nation."

Conservatives will call the Government to account, and I hope that they will be true to that statement. In what I have heard today, there is little evidence that they will govern for the benefit of the whole nation.

[Mr. Amess]

The next sentence is:

"The education of young people will be my Government's first priority."

I applaud that, but where are the rotten educators? They are all in Labour-run councils. Until the local elections, we ran only Buckinghamshire; it was our only county council. We are talking about Labour councils. If the Prime Minister now intends to criticise his Labour councils, that is wonderful.

I was attacked by the Labour and Liberal parties for sending my eldest child to the nearest non-grant-maintained non-selective school—but apparently it is all right for the Prime Minister to have his own private agenda. Conservatives have no intention of letting the Government get away with the humbug that we have heard today about education.

The next part of the Gracious Speech reads:

"The central economic objectives of my Government are high and stable levels of economic growth and employment, to be achieved by ensuring opportunity for all."

I am aghast. There is Labour, or new Labour, talking about opportunity for all. I must ask my hon. Friends: was that not the theme of the Conservative party manifesto and of our party conference? Yet now it is included in the Gracious Speech. I am flabbergasted.

The next line is:

"The essential platform for achieving these objectives is economic stability."

When we obtained power in 1979, this country was a disaster. The economy was on the floor. Now, Labour is coming in with a healthy economy. The Labour Government have been given every opportunity; even unemployment is falling.

Then there is the disgraceful matter of the Bank of England. I do not believe that the people who drafted the Labour manifesto had not already worked out that they intended immediately to give power to the Governor of the Bank of England. Why was that not in the manifesto? We heard weasel words from the Prime Minister about that today. Labour jolly well did not tell people because that would have been a tangible issue, which Conservatives would certainly have attacked.

Next we are told:

"A new partnership with business will be at the heart of my Government's plans to build a modern and dynamic economy to improve the competitiveness of British industry."

That is new language for the Labour party. It has always hated competition, and has had more to do with socialism and manipulating things. It is extraordinary for Labour suddenly to start talking about competitiveness.

Labour has always regarded profit as a dirty word. The right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman) made light of the word socialism, but I assume that everything has been thrown out now.

Another paragraph tells us:

"A Bill will be introduced to ensure that as many people as possible have access to the benefits of the National Lottery including for health and education projects."

It was the Conservative party that introduced the national lottery, and a hard core of Labour Members with interests in Liverpool and connections with the pools promoters

were against it. The national lottery has been a huge success. However, unless everything in the Treasury has changed, its rules will have to be altered before the Government can introduce specific funding for education and the health service. I hope that those details will appear in the Red Book when the Budget is delivered next month.

The Queen's Speech continues:

"Measures will be introduced to enable capital receipts from the sale of council houses to be invested in housebuilding and renovation as part of my Government's determination to deal with homelessness and unemployment."

If the Conservative party had not sold council and corporation houses, there would have been no capital receipts in the first place. It was always our premise that capital receipts could be sold if local authorities did not have any debts. Are the new Labour Government saying that they will ignore all local authority debt?

Mr. Pike: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that many councils have major housing problems, and that only in the past few years has Conservative dogma allowed them to use such money to tackle those problems? Does he recall that, shortly before an election, a Conservative Chancellor allowed 50 per cent. of capital receipts to be used in that year?

Mr. Amess: I concede that we want to have sensible, realistic debate in this Chamber on the entire housing issue. I remind the hon. Gentleman that many of the rotten housing authorities are Labour run. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman can tell us how to address the problems caused by the increasing number of transient relationships. Every week in our surgeries we must deal with increased demand for housing from younger and younger people who want separate accommodation. Those real issues must be settled sensibly—they will not be addressed simply by dealing with capital receipts.

The Queen's Speech continues:

"Decentralisation is essential to my Government's vision of a modern nation."

I am sorry, but I interpret that as reducing the importance of this Chamber even more. If Labour Members think that the Conservatives will sit back and let them get away with it, they are in for a big shock. I want a return to the situation that prevailed when I was first elected to Parliament: I am prepared to attend deliberations in this Chamber night after night and morning after morning—I do not care how much that inconveniences people.

The Gracious Speech also states:

"In the European Union, my Government will take a leading role. They will seek to promote employment, improve competitiveness, complete the Single Market and opt into the Social Chapter."

Let there be no doubt that a Conservative Government took the United Kingdom into Europe. It is now suggested that the Labour party, which changed its mind about Europe on 18 occasions—the Prime Minister also changed his position—will sort out Europe. However, the game was given away by scenes on television of the new Labour Ministers being welcomed in Europe, where they are viewed as a soft touch. They think that they will sell out British interests in Europe.

Ms Dari Taylor (Stockton, South): I hope that I am in order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I should be grateful if the

hon. Member for Southend, West (Mr. Amess) would identify the 18 occasions on which we changed our views on Europe. Can he be specific?

Mr. Amess: I hesitated before giving way to the hon. Lady because I did not know whether she had made her maiden speech.

Ms Taylor: If that is a problem, Mr. Deputy Speaker, perhaps the hon. Gentleman could write to me with those details.

Mr. Amess: I think that a maiden speech should be a special event, and the hon. Member for Stockton, South may not wish to associate hers with me. However, I shall assist the hon. Lady by writing to her about that matter.

Mr. Pike: My hon. Friend the Member for Stockton, South (Ms Taylor) is the daughter of my predecessor, and I am very pleased to see her take her seat in the House today.

Mr. Amess: I had no idea that that was the case. I offer the hon. Lady many congratulations.

As far as I am aware, the Labour party opposed the single market, so it is extraordinary that it now proposes to sort it out. I shall not delay the House by discussing this issue any further, but I believe that the social chapter will be an absolute disaster. Some absolutely unbelievable drivel was spoken about the minimum wage today. I have already spoken to many business men in my constituency who are frightened about the consequences of the minimum wage.

I think that the hon. Member for Corby (Mr. Hope)—who has returned to his place—was a little ungallant in slightly insulting employment agencies. I have been in recruitment for many years, but my involvement was in recruiting accountants, secretaries and computer staff. The hon. Gentleman referred to a different area, but I think that he was a little unkind in his remarks about employment agencies generally.

The Gracious Speech states that the Government "will retain strong armed forces, including the nuclear deterrent."

The Prime Minister came to this place as a supporter of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament.

Mr. Hope: The hon. Gentleman has just referred to employment agencies, and I should like to correct him. In the Corby constituency, there are 16 employment agencies, and 3,000 people are employed through them. I use the word "employed" advisedly. These people can find themselves on zero-hour contracts, which mean that they can be told that they have a job one day but no job the next.

I have examples of employment agencies in Corby illegally using child labour—that is, young people under 16—by putting them into local factories. Some employment agencies have contracts which mean that, if a person fails to turn up on the fourth day of his contract, he is paid £1 an hour for each hour of his three days of work. That is a result of the Conservatives' flexible labour market, which has destroyed lives and the local economy in my constituency. I shall be working hard with my colleagues to ensure that we have fair employment again.

Mr. Amess: As I hinted earlier, the hon. Member for Corby has strong views. I am at a disadvantage, in that I

do not know anything about these 16 employment agencies, but that is not my experience of such agencies. I am disappointed that the existing law cannot deal with the matter, but no doubt he will attempt to do so quickly.

To return to defence, when the Prime Minister entered the House in 1983, he supported the CND. I am sorry, but I believe that one should make up one's mind on such big issues before becoming a Member of Parliament. Now that he is Prime Minister, he says that he will protect the nuclear deterrent.

At the end of the Gracious Speech, we are told that the Government

"will programme House of Commons business to ensure more effective scrutiny of Bills and better use of the time of Members of the House of Commons."

What does that mean? Some hon. Members might be concerned if too much were revealed on this occasion, but this Chamber is where our duty lies. The Gracious Speech goes on to say that, during the Session, the Government

"will also publish in draft for public consultation a number of Bills, which it intends to introduce in subsequent sessions of this Parliament."

That is fair enough.

"They will propose the establishment of a new Select Committee of the House of Commons to look at ways of making Parliamentary procedure more effective and efficient."

I was not born yesterday. Starting with the changes to Prime Minister's questions, the Government are attempting to sidestep the House of Commons. The Opposition have no intention of allowing that to happen.

It would be churlish not to reflect for a moment on the obvious joy of Labour Members at their election victory. It would be wrong of me to emphasise that Labour did not receive as many votes as we did in 1992, or that the Liberal Democrats were a percentage point down on 1992 but doubled their number of seats. No Conservative Member could complain about the first-past-the-post system. I hope that the great joy of Labour Members at their electoral success will not develop into arrogance. I entered this place in 1983, when there were 147 new Members of Parliament. We were humble and in awe of this Chamber and our democratic process.

I say to my Conservative colleagues that we may be traumatised by the defeat that we suffered two weeks ago, in which we lost a number of superb colleagues, but we must get a grip of ourselves as soon as possible. Having witnessed today what the Labour party has in store for this country, it is the destiny of the Conservative party to save this country from Labour, who will wreck the United Kingdom.

9.9 pm

Mr. John Home Robertson (East Lothian): The hon. Member for Southend, West (Mr. Amess)—via Basildon and wherever else—had better take a grip of himself and calm down a bit.

Before I return to his extraordinary comments, I join other hon. Members in congratulating you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, on the important office that you have now assumed. I am sure that we all look forward to serving under your chairmanship. I also congratulate my hon. Friends the Members for Milton Keynes, North-East (Mr. White) and for Corby (Mr. Hope) on their eloquent

[*Mr. John Home Robertson*]

maiden speeches. I am one of the old lags who made his maiden speech from the Government Benches, and it is a great joy to return to this side of the House after 18 years.

We were lectured by the hon. Member for Southend, West about arrogance and the abuse of power. I realise that he has had a busy time moving from one constituency to another, and we got the message that he is not a happy chappy, that he did not enjoy the election campaign or the result, and that he did not even enjoy the Queen's Speech, but he would be well advised to calm down and perhaps take a holiday. He has had a bad time, but he really should reflect on the judgment of the people on the Conservative Government whom he supported. He warned us against the risk of arrogance. I put it to him that he is suffering the consequences of the judgment of the people on the arrogance displayed by the Conservative Government over many years, so a little humility from Opposition Members would not go amiss at this stage.

Many years ago, I made my maiden speech from the Government Benches, and Denis Healey was Chancellor at the time. I came in at a by-election and joined a sinking ship. Since then, I have listened to the triumphalism of the Conservative party and the awful arrogance of Mrs. Thatcher as Prime Minister. My constituents in Scotland, like people throughout the country, suffered grievously over those years, so I find it hard to express the joy and happiness that I and my constituents feel now that we are, at last, in a position to begin to put things right.

I am delighted with the proposals in the Queen's Speech. After all the rubbish that we have endured over 18 years, we now have a Government who are putting education, employment and the health service right at the top of the political agenda. Those are the issues about which our constituents are concerned. Our people want the Government to go to work on those issues.

There are 3,000 people in my constituency out of work. That is the official figure, but the real figure is far higher. It is outrageous that, even in a comparatively prosperous part of Scotland, so many are out of work. It is right that the Government place the highest importance on the creation of job opportunities, particularly for the young unemployed. It is right that we should address the ludicrous waste of resources in the national health service on administration and redirect them into the care of patients. It is right to place more emphasis on education and other vital services.

My background is in agriculture. A large part of my constituency is involved in agriculture and beef farming—a sector that has suffered more than most in recent years because of the appalling incompetence of the Government and the outrageous aggravation of our relationships with our European partners. I am delighted that we are now working with our European partners to address these and other problems. We are certainly on the right track.

The hon. Member for Southend, West and other hon. Members should face up to the judgment of the people of this nation at the general election. The Conservatives were thrown out, and rightly so. Their problem was that they had completely lost touch with the people who originally elected them. They displayed an intolerant and intolerable arrogance towards the people of this country at every level. They seemed to think that they had a divine right

to rule at every level, and if they could not do that directly, they appointed quangos. They took powers away from elected local authorities and handed it over to quangos packed with their own placemen.

That was particularly obnoxious in Scotland. They could not get their people elected to Parliament or local authorities, so they transferred more and more power and money from the public budget to quangos packed with their own people. That looks bad, and people are not prepared to put up with it. It is one of the reasons why the Tories suffered such a rejection at the polls. They thought that they could get away with anything, whether it be the poll tax, cash for questions or the outrageous abuse of power by Tory minorities in Scotland, Wales, London and other parts of the country.

I was delighted to hear my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, in his speech to the parliamentary Labour party last week, say that we are the servants now. That is our approach to government. The people are fed up with being dictated to and having policies imposed on them year after year. What they earnestly want, and what they will now get, is a Government who intend to serve them. We shall do that through our social and economic policies, and by ensuring that our system of democratic government is returned to such a condition that it is respected and people want to take part in it. It is depressing that so many young people feel alienated from the political process, and think that all politicians are corrupt in some way. I am afraid that that is one of the awful results of years of a Conservative Government. We must improve the system and make it more respected again. We must have the highest standards in public life.

I look forward to a freedom of information Act and a Bill of Rights. Above all, I look forward to the reform of the House of Lords and the removal of the hereditary element. It is a pity that we have not been able to include that in this Queen's Speech, but the sooner we introduce such a measure, the better. I am thrilled that we shall now start the process of establishing a Parliament for Scotland to serve the people of my country, and likewise an Assembly for Wales. It has been a long fight.

I was the constituency delegate at the 1976 Labour party conference which moved the resolution that led to the party's commitment to the establishment of a Parliament for Scotland. That seems a long time ago. We had a referendum on it, which we won, but when the Tories came to power they stood the result on its head. We have stuck clearly and firmly to our principles on the need to democratise the government of Scotland, particularly after all those years of a minority Government. The Scottish Office has a budget of £15 billion, which, for the past umpteen years, has been under the control of a tiny minority of elected representatives. In the previous Parliament, just 10 Tory Members out of 72 in Scotland were able to dictate everything that happened in Scotland. We need accountable government in Scotland.

The Queen's Speech provides for a referendum. I suppose that it could be argued that there is no need for a referendum on this issue, as the two parties opposed to democratic devolution within the United Kingdom—the Conservative party, which wants to keep the status quo, and the Scottish National party, which wants total independence—have been routed at the polls in Scotland.

There is not a single Scottish Conservative left in the House of Commons. The Scottish National party did not fare much better.

One could argue that, as there is unanimity of public opinion in Scotland on the need for democratic devolution within the United Kingdom, why bother with a referendum. However, I accept the case for a referendum to entrench the position of a Scottish Parliament for all time. It is important to show a clear, popular mandate for the establishment of that Parliament to ensure that no future Government of any colour will be able to use a majority in the House to abolish it at their whim. We must establish the Scottish Parliament as an irrevocable democratic institution, never to be abolished by a Government in Westminster against the will of the people of Scotland.

We must have an end to unaccountable and irresponsible government in Scotland. We shall have that when we have a Scottish Parliament, and I am delighted that, at last, we are making a first step in that direction in the Queen's Speech.

9.18 pm

Mr. William Cash (Stone): May I first congratulate you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the other Deputy Speaker and the new Chairman of Ways and Means on your appointments. It is a great pleasure for me to see old friends from both sides of the House working in a different capacity and having such important and responsible positions. I also thank those in my constituency—both members of the local party and electors—for giving me the privilege of returning to the House after 13 years as a Member of Parliament.

A number of maiden speeches have been made today, including one by the hon. Member for Stafford (Mr. Kidney), my successor in the constituency. I congratulate him on his speech; I wish him well, and wish the constituents of Stafford well under the present Government.

I share many of the views of my hon. Friend the Member for Southend, West (Mr. Amess). I do not believe that this was one of the best election campaigns of all time. However, it gives me some pleasure to be in real opposition, rather than the kind of opposition in which I have had to engage over the past few years. The reasons are pretty obvious, and will emerge more and more clearly as time goes on.

I am not going to give namby-pamby congratulations to the Government on their fantastic election result. I think that they have deceived the people: the people have been cruelly deceived, and the Government's Achilles heel will be public expenditure. I have talked to many members of the Government, and I have heard the anxieties that are in their hearts and minds. They know perfectly well that they cannot deliver, and that they will not be able to do so. What is more, they will not be able to do so for one simple reason—the ceiling of the Maastricht convergence criteria. They have engaged in the most cruel deceit of the British people.

During the election campaign, I put it to the constituents of Stone, who, I am glad to say, were good enough to elect me, that the reason why—certainly for the first time in my recollection in politics, which goes back the best part of 30 years—the Labour party was not capable of offering pension increases for the elderly and

in spending on health and education was very simple. Labour has adopted exactly the same policies as are embedded in the Maastricht treaty, which prevent it from increasing expenditure beyond the levels that have been set by those totem poles of European government.

I challenge any member of the Government to answer that point, at any time. I tried to engage the Prime Minister in the same argument earlier today, but he ran away, for a very simple reason: he knows perfectly well, as indeed do I, that the real reason why the Labour party won the election is that it conned the British people on the question of Europe. That will come back to haunt the Government, because they cannot and will not deliver on public expenditure, and we have them like rats in a trap between now and the next general election. That is the point, and it will come through.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Mr. Paul Boateng): This is fantasy.

Mr. Cash: It amuses me to listen to the hilarity among those on the Government Front Bench. Front Benchers know perfectly well that the argument that I am presenting will cause them no end of trouble.

Mr. Gerald Bermingham (St. Helens, South): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Cash: Of course: I shall be delighted to do so.

Mr. Bermingham: The hon. Gentleman has been quietly in the wilderness for a number of years—

Mr. Boateng: He was never quiet.

Mr. Bermingham: I accept that unreservedly. The hon. Gentleman, however, is expressing what I can only describe as an eccentric view, which I did not find had any support on the doorsteps. Does he think that his eccentric view, and those of his friends, played any great part in the devastation of his party?

Mr. Cash: My simple reply to that rather simple point is this. During the election, I was astonished to see members of the Labour party running like fury towards the Euro-sceptic view. They knew perfectly well that, if they had persisted in the Europhilia that had pervaded the Labour party over the preceding five to 10 years, they would not have been able to convince the British people; and they therefore began to move in our direction. We won the argument; the Labour party conned the people. Unfortunately, and this is part of our difficulty, some arguments were not presented by our party during the election. The Labour party has deceived the public, but that will come back to haunt the Government in due course, as I have said.

The three principles that should govern our party in the next few years are simple. They are encapsulated in three simple words: enterprise, compassion, patriotism. I say enterprise because it is through enterprise, through small and medium businesses, through larger businesses and thereby through a strong economy—which we have been able to produce since we left the exchange rate mechanism, which was a complete disaster and which I fought against for many years—that we have been able to

[Mr. Cash]

achieve an increase in the value and growth of our economy, to the point where we were able to reduce inflation to 2.7 per cent. In my constituency of Stone, unemployment is at 2.9 per cent. as compared, for example, with France, where it is 13 per cent., Germany, where it is about the same, and Spain, where it is 22 per cent.

That has all happened since we came out of the exchange rate mechanism. The connection between the economy and the European issue is at the heart of where we are going over the next five years. If hon. Members are not prepared to grapple with that question or to accept the fact that those two things are interrelated, I fear for this country's future.

Through enterprise, we obtain, through a fair tax system, the ability to pay for necessary public expenditure. I am not against public expenditure. To a certain extent, there was an ideology in my party against the idea of public expenditure for its own sake, but, if we increase the size of the cake and have a fair tax system, we can provide for necessary, but not wilful, public expenditure.

If we then address the question whether the 26 Bills in the Queen's Speech will improve opportunities for this country's people, I ask hon. Members to consider this. Every Bill that imposes a legal duty, subject to judicial review, on this country's people, in whatever sphere, automatically does two things. It increases the volume of public expenditure that is required as a duty enforceable by law and, of course, it increases the number of people who have to administrate it.

Therefore, I suggest that we have a thorough review, through the Law Commission and the Government Departments, to assess those incredible volumes of statute law, plus the enormous quantity of law that is pouring out of the European Commission, to evaluate it, to take a measured view and to reduce it so that we are able to provide proper public expenditure, but not just simply for its own sake.

In my constituency, there are many good teachers and many good schools, but the problem is that the amount of money they seek bears no relationship to the quality of the education that we could produce if we concentrated properly on things such as discipline in schools—which does not have to be brutalistic or unfair, but should be firm—and not just on providing people with the sort of environment in which they can more or less do what they like. If we have a proper sense of discipline and stick to a national curriculum, and if the three Rs operate effectively, we can provide, not just with words but in action, the sort of education that young people properly deserve.

The Queen's Speech says that the Government "will cut class sizes using money saved as a result of legislation phasing out the assisted places scheme."

I know from my personal experience in my old constituency of Stafford that Stafford independent grammar schools benefited enormously from the assisted places scheme. That is one side of the equation. The other is that they must provide the money that is needed to cut class sizes. It is no good just looking at the primary schools and the classes of three, four and five-year-olds. They need to make provision in the schools for children of 11 and over.

The Government are not prepared to address that issue, because they know that they cannot afford it, and they cannot afford it for the reasons that I have already given. They are constrained by the criteria I have mentioned. We are not governing ourselves. The people of this country have to understand that, for as long as we have the Maastricht treaty, we are not governing ourselves.

Another part of the Queen's Speech says:

"The central economic objectives of my Government are high and stable levels of economic growth and employment . . . The essential platform for achieving these objectives is economic stability."

That is almost word for word what is contained in our 1992 manifesto. Embedded in that is the belief that the exchange rate mechanism should be the central plank of our counter-inflationary policy. That is why the Government are introducing an independent bank. It is step-by-step absorption into the process of being governed by unaccountable bankers situated in Frankfurt. That is what this is all about. Anybody who doubts that—

Mr. Bermingham rose—

Mr. Cash: I shall not give way again. The hon. Gentleman had his chance before.

The Queen's Speech says:

"To that end a Bill will be introduced to give the Bank of England operational responsibility for setting interest rates, in order to deliver price stability".

That is straight out of the Maastricht treaty. It is not a Queen's Speech; it could have been written by Jacques Delors or Mr. Santer. The Queen's Speech goes on to say that that will be done

"within a framework of enhanced accountability."

In reality, the Government are talking not about enhanced accountability but about handing over to others the decisions that belong to the elected politicians of this country. Those politicians can provide the answers for the people who went into the polling booths on 1 May with a free choice about what type of Government they wanted. That Government should set their own priorities and targets and, within that framework, give the people of this country good government. They should not be passing the buck to some people in Frankfurt or to an independent Governor of the Bank of England.

If one were to take the New Zealand model, which has not been mentioned today, I might have some sympathy with the idea. In Germany, and to some extent in the United States, there are degrees of relative independence, but that is a world away from what is contained in the provisions for a central bank. Those provisions mean that the bank would be completely independent and unaccountable and that we would lose the right to make the decisions that belong to the people who elected us on 1 May. That is a total abdication of our responsibility and trust and I shall not allow it to happen so long as I remain a Member of Parliament.

I believe that the British people, day after day during the election, knew instinctively that that was the case. That is why the European issue was raised on the doorstep day in, day out. They may not have understood every word of it, but they understood instinctively where it was all leading.

I am deeply concerned at the way in which we conducted our campaign on the European issue. I do not want to dwell on that now, but we did not apologise

sufficiently for the mistake made with the exchange rate mechanism. We lost credibility and we did not explain the connection between the European issue and its impact on the daily lives of our constituents. That was not explained because the Maastricht treaty was passed under our Government. I make no apology for the fact that I voted against the treaty 47 times on a three-line whip—as far as I know, that is more than any other hon. Member—and I would do so again tomorrow for the same reasons.

Mr. Hope: I should inform the hon. Member for Stone (Mr. Cash) that, in the 1980s, during the closure of our steelworks, Corby benefited from the European regional development fund, to the tune of £30 million, and we benefited from iron and steel contributions and from loans and grants. Without Europe, Corby town and the Corby constituency would not be flourishing. We know in whose interests the European Union has been operating: it has been operating in British interests. We shall ensure that that is how it operates in future.

Mr. Cash: I have never heard such claptrap in my life. That money is our money, which is merely being recirculated. Does the hon. Gentleman not realise that? There are two coal mines adjacent to my constituency, in which many coal miners work. Does he not realise that the Germans are receiving £5 billion a year in subsidies authorised by the European Commission, whereas this country receives only £100 million? I accept that he has not been an hon. Member for very long, but he has a lot to learn.

Mr. Boateng: It was not claptrap.

Mr. Cash: I am entitled to make the point that the hon. Member for Corby (Mr. Hope) will have to learn a thing or two. We will all have to do so. I am continuing to do so, and he will have to do the same.

Mr. Birmingham: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Is it not a courtesy of the House, which has been forgotten by the hon. Member for Stafford—

Mr. Cash: For Stone.

Mr. Birmingham: The hon. Gentleman keeps moving; I do not know where he is now. Mr. Deputy Speaker, is it not a matter of courtesy and tradition that one never, ever insults or is rude to a new Member in his or her early days in the House? It never happened in my day, and I hope that you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, will ensure that the wild man, from wherever he comes, learns the same lesson.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): The hon. Member for Corby (Mr. Hope) has made his maiden speech. Therefore, he is already a part of the hurly-burly of the House. It is up to hon. Members to decide how they behave themselves; it is not a matter for the Chair.

Mr. Birmingham: Further to that point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I congratulate you on your appointment. Over many long years, however, we have always observed those courtesies. Perhaps the hon. Member for Stone (Mr. Cash) should be reminded that good manners arise from gracefulness and not from churlishness.

Mr. Cash: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for your ruling on that matter.

The Queen's Speech states that the Government want to "improve the competitiveness of British industry."

How on earth will we improve the competitiveness of British industry if we are saddled and shackled with the social chapter and a minimum wage? I have already mentioned the adult unemployment figures in the rest of Europe, but what of the figures on youth unemployment? It is absolutely clear that, as hon. Members, we have had placed in us an absolute trust and responsibility to prevent our young people from falling into the impossible situation that now prevails in Italy, for example, which has 33 per cent. youth unemployment. Spain has approximately 35 per cent. youth unemployment, and France has 28 per cent. unemployment. That is a disgrace, and it is being done under those rules.

If we get Europe wrong, we shall get everything wrong, because it is a legal framework. I am not arguing against the single market, because I am completely in favour of it. I am also not against the idea of a European Community, but I am totally against the entire concept of European government. In a nutshell, very simply put, my argument is: European trade, yes; European government, no. The argument is very simple, and heeding it would save Europe from the disorder and instability that it is heading towards, and which is already apparent on the streets of the capitals of Europe.

The Queen's Speech contains a commitment to decentralisation. The Prime Minister, through Her Majesty the Queen, states:

"Decentralisation is essential to my Government's vision of a modern nation . . . a devolved Scottish Parliament and the establishment of a Welsh Assembly."

The fact, however, is that nothing is more centralising than a central bank. The reality is that this arrangement is nothing more or less than a camouflage for reducing Scotland and Wales to mere provinces of a federal Europe.

That is why, with respect to my, if I may say so, hon. Friend the Member for Belfast, South (Rev. Martin Smyth), the people of Northern Ireland are rightly concerned about the direction in which the process of Europeanisation is going. The object of the exercise, among other things, is to reduce that part of the island of Ireland that is in the United Kingdom to a region—a province, called Eire or Ireland, within this new country called Europe. Anyone can see that that is what it is all about.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): The European Union does not have much work to do in that regard, because for years the British Government have been seeking to detach us. On the concept of regionalisation, I believe that there is an argument for the federation of the nations in the United Kingdom, and that idea might have to be considered more effectively when we consider the future government of this land.

Mr. Cash: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for those remarks. Some extremely important constitutional issues will be considered during this Parliament; it will be one of the most important and reforming Parliaments for generations. It is our duty and responsibility to ensure that, irrespective of the size of the Government's majority, such matters are scrutinised word by word, line by line, and, as has been said, on the Floor of the House.

[Mr. Cash]

I shall refer to a speech, entitled "Britain in Europe", made by the Prime Minister on 5 April 1995 to Chatham house. I was going to raise that point earlier, but, with his prescience, the Prime Minister decided that he would not accept my intervention. One sentence from that speech of 5 April 1995 shows the monumental misjudgment of the Prime Minister:

"Other European countries are not pushing for strides towards Federalism."

That is the basis on which the present Prime Minister and Government have constructed their European policy. If his judgment was so faulty and it was such a monumental misjudgment, it follows that we need have absolutely no faith in the direction in which we are being taken on the European issue today.

I was going to say the following to the Prime Minister earlier. The Government speak of a fresh start. If we do not renegotiate the treaty, we are allowing the process to go ahead, irrespective of the wishes and consent of the individual members of the countries of the member states. A renegotiation of the treaty is needed—now that would be a fresh start.

Only two days ago, we celebrated the anniversary of a speech made in the House in 1953, by Winston Churchill, in which he said unequivocally:

"nor do we intend to be merged in a Federal European system."—[*Official Report*, 11 May 1953; Vol. 515, c. 891.]

He said that we would be in Europe but not of it. We should take note of those wise words and put them into effect. However, we cannot do that unless we go back to the Maastricht treaty as part of the treaty on European Union, and pose the question that I will demand of the Government at the intergovernmental conference that takes place in a few weeks' time.

Unless we do that, the *acquis communautaire*, the ratchet effect, the irreversibility of the protocol of the third stage, the reality that we shall be networked into a legal framework which takes us into a federal system on the slipstream is inevitable. What is also inevitable is the impossibility of the Government delivering on their election promises on public expenditure and a range of other things, including the ridiculous notion that they can represent one nation when they are taking us into one country—a country called Europe.

This Parliament is faced with monumental decisions that we have to measure up to, not just on one side of the House or the other but across the Floor of the House in the national interest. Even with their enormous majority, the Government have a trust, gained at the election on 1 May, to discharge to the people of this country. If they do not measure up to it—all the signs are that they will not—they will be condemned by future generations for having taken us into a system of law and of government from which they will not be able to extricate themselves without unbelievable disturbance, disorder and instability. That is the measure of where we are being taken, and it is on that basis that we must confront the Government during the next five years.

9.45 pm

Mr. Gerald Bermingham (St. Helens, South): In a calmer moment—I am always a calm man—I welcome you to your new position, Mr. Deputy Speaker. It gives

me great pleasure because, over the years that I have known you, you have shown yourself to be a fine and honourable man, and I am sure that you will grace the Chair.

Listening to the speech that has just been made, I had a feeling of *deja vu*. I have heard it all before from the hon. Member for Stone (Mr. Cash). Even your colleagues know that. You come here and rant and rave with no constructive policies. You have nothing much to say for the future of this land, and you say it at great length.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman is saying "you". I should be grateful if he would set a better example to new Members.

Mr. Bermingham: From you or your family, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I always take correction. I shall merely say that the hon. Gentleman brought nothing to the House. He has wasted time again and again lecturing us about Europe, when reality says that we are part of Europe. He now tries to tell us about Northern Ireland, which is part of Europe. I declare an interest in that subject, because I am a southern Irishman, born and bred. We are part of Europe and proud of it.

I represent St. Helens—one of the finest places in the land—which has been wrecked by the rubbish that we have suffered in the past 18 years. Once upon a time, Europe was kind. It recognised that the north-west was an area of great poverty. It is. The hon. Member for Stone will not listen, because he has heard it all before, but there are people in my constituency who have not worked for 10 or 12 years. In some streets, nobody goes to work.

There is poverty beyond measure in my constituency, but there was £350 million of RECHAR money and £750 million of objective 1 money sitting there for us. All we needed was a Government prepared to match it pound for pound. Not a pound came from the Government, so not a pound came from Europe. Together with my local Member of the European Parliament, who is very sensible—I praise him—I have set about trying to change the rules so that we can have the European money and begin investing.

I need jobs not just for the 4,000 or 5,000 in my constituency who are out of work, but for another 6,000 who fall into the 32 different categories that the previous Government introduced to massage the unemployment figures. Those are people between 50 and 65 who are deemed retired. They would give their right arm for a job.

Let us get real. Europe is an entity. If our Government support me on this, as I am sure they will—I am pleased to talk about "our Government", because for all the years that I have been in the House I have always referred to the Government across the way, who did nothing for my constituency—they will begin to draw in benefits for the north-west, for Scotland and for the other deprived regions, without the system costing the Government a penny. All we have to do is to change that rule; it is simple.

I know that in my constituency, firms such as Pilkington and United Glass would welcome that change; firms across England would welcome it. "Investment" is a nice word. I hope that, in this Parliament, we do not hear the ranting and raving about Europe that we have had to suffer for the past five years. It has been boring: I come back to that point.

Let us now look constructively at the Gracious Speech. Legislation will be introduced to amend the criminal law; I declare an interest as a practising lawyer. I am fed up with being told about little Johnny who keeps getting bailed or released. I am talking about the 14-year-old local thug—we all have them—who commits another 33 crimes before the police arrest him again, and another 55 before he gets to court. That is ludicrous.

Delinquents can be spotted very early. One has only to ask any teacher in a primary school or any teacher in a secondary school. They will say, "Young Johnny, young Mary—they are wrong 'uns." How do they know? They have the experience of watching. Many long years ago, in my early days, I was a rather bad teacher in a primary school in Rotherham; I lived in Sheffield at the time. I remember the headmistress saying to me about a young girl, "She's a wrong 'un." That girl was 10. I asked, "How do you know?" The headmistress said, "You mark my words." Roughly 14 years later, I defended the girl for murder. The teacher was right.

If only we could have taken that girl out of the system then and put her into an institution such as the ones in the Massachusetts system in America. That system is superb, and I hope that Ministers here may be listening. The system ought to be looked at again. We tried to examine it in the Select Committee on Home Affairs in 1986 under the chairmanship of an eminent lawyer who happened to be a Conservative Member. We looked at the system, we evaluated it and we found that it worked. Would the then Government do anything about it? No.

The Select Committee looked instead at private prisons. We divided on the matter, and even some Conservative Members voted with me against the plan. In those days, we were minus 144. I hope that, now that we are plus 179, the Government will look at the real cause of crime. I hope that they will work out how to identify the young thug and the young bully, and I hope that they will aim to take him or her out of the system.

I do not mean that delinquents should be treated inhumanely, but they should be taught and guided, and should work their way out of criminality. Only when they are no longer a threat to our society should we put them fully back into it. I know that that suggestion is revolutionary, but it is realistic. It has been carried out in other countries over the years.

In Massachusetts, the reoffending rate was reduced from 78 per cent. for juveniles to 28 per cent. That is not a bad investment. It involves treating the situation realistically. If someone there committed one crime, he or she was dealt with for that crime. If people committed a second crime and it was proved that they had done it, they were deemed delinquents, and the system then came into play. It does not matter what sort of home delinquents come from or what their background is. If they are a potential danger to society, they need to be taken out early on, and every effort, in the kindest possible way, should be made to ensure that they do not become a real threat.

Those of us who are lawyers know that the peak offending age is 14; that is when so many crimes occur. What does that do to old ladies, to car theft figures, to insurance and household insurance premiums? Let us get real. If we intend to tackle the problem, as I am sure our Government do, we must look at it in great depth.

It is not enough just to detect crime. The police tell me that, over the past 14 to 18 years, their ability to detect crime has not been very great because they have not had

the resources. The crooks have better equipment than they have. They have better interception devices, telephonic and communication devices.

The police are forever behind in the race. We have to tackle crime properly, and not play with it as the Conservative Government did. The then Home Secretary produced a new proposal every day, but he got it wrong every time, and his proposals were rubbish, particularly the idea of extending sentences. We shall return to a civilised approach when the European convention on human rights becomes part of our law.

There are thousands of reasons why people do not say anything at police stations. It is not because they are crooks, but because they are terrified and often do not know what to do. They do not know what questions they will have to answer. They do not know the evidence, and nor do the lawyers. The removal of the right to silence was a disgrace, but back it will come with the incorporation of the European convention on human rights, as will many other civil liberties.

The former Home Secretary seemed incapable of doing anything constructive. All his proposals were destructive. He has left us a legacy that will take many years of parliamentary time to tidy up. The thought that the right hon. and learned Gentleman might actually lead the Conservative party is abhorrent when one considers what has happened. The Lewis incident was just one example. I was on the Home Affairs Select Committee at the time. What we saw, heard and learned left us in no doubt where the truth lay. However, the matter may well be explored by his former junior Minister, the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe). I wait with great interest to see what happens.

The Gracious Speech includes a pledge to put youth back to work. When I was a boy at school, having been sent to this country by my family—I do not know what they had against me—I ended up at a grammar school. I do not deny that I went to a public school first. When I was in the fifth and sixth years at grammar school, companies came to visit the school looking for boys for apprenticeships and industrial training. When I was at university, companies came round offered us jobs. Two or three years ago, however, there was not a single apprentice in St. Helens. We cannot blame the employers in St. Helens, but the system in which the youth do not go to work.

I hope that the Government's pledge to create some 250,000 jobs is just a step on a long road. We are an industrious and innovative nation. We have the skills and the ability. Let us not waste them. We have seen the waste of at least one generation, if not two, in my lifetime. That is something we can never forgive in the years ahead. We must always remember that we owe a duty to the next generation and the one beyond, and in my case probably two beyond that. That is our duty and our mission.

Glancing through the Gracious Speech, I see that there is so much I could have said had I not had to listen to the speech about Maastricht and the prayers of the chicken runner from Southend, West.

Let me simply say to my hon. Friends on the Front Bench that this must be an innovative, driving, imaginative and creative Parliament. We have been given a chance that we will probably never have again—the chance to show the nation that we mean what we say and that we care for the little people, those who cannot defend

[Mr. Bermingham]

themselves. We want to rebuild a manufacturing society. Those of us who represent manufacturing areas have seen the waste and want over the years. We want people to know that, when they fall sick, there is someone to care for them, and that they will not have to lie on a trolley in a hospital corridor.

We want children to learn. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment has now come around to my view. He is much younger than me, as I recall when we served together on Sheffield city council all those years ago, but he has come around to the view that the old ideas work. It may be old-fashioned, but when children had to recite their tables and do PE, the system worked. It taught the kids. If we do not have a literate and numerate society, how can we produce in future the engineers, scientists, teachers, doctors, lawyers—forget lawyers, we do not always need them—and those kind people who deliver and develop the society that provides and cares? We have the challenge; let us make the change.

It being Ten o'clock, the debate stood adjourned.

Debate to be resumed tomorrow.

Residential Care

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—[Mr. Kevin Hughes.]

10 pm

Mr. Michael Colvin (Romsey): I am very pleased to have won the privilege of making the first Adjournment debate speech in the Parliament, although I am sorry to be making it from the Opposition Benches. I endorse what was said in the previous debate by other hon. Members about your appointment, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to preside over our affairs. I wish you well, and I am sure that you will conduct our affairs from the Chair with distinction and good grace.

Long-term residential and nursing home care for the elderly concerns most of us who have an interest in politics—both at national and local level. During a general election campaign, there is certainly ample opportunity repeatedly to visit homes in our constituencies and to talk to many of the residents about the problems that concern them.

I had hoped that tonight would turn out to be an exclusively Southampton evening, representing as I do the Bassett and Swaythling wards of the city. My next-door constituency neighbour, the hon. Member for Southampton, Itchen (Mr. Denham), who is now a Minister in the Department of Social Security, might have replied to the debate. Both he and I have taken a very special interest in the problems associated with long-term residential and nursing care for the elderly and therefore joined in applauding the campaign run by our local newspaper, *The Southern Evening Echo*, which was the first paper to draw attention to the crisis in long-term care and the iniquitous impact of the means test rules on families who had saved or had bought their homes.

From early 1995, the newspaper consistently campaigned under the slogan "The Old Guard" for a change in the rules in order to allow elderly people in residential and nursing homes to keep their savings, homes and any inheritance that they intended to pass on to their children. "The Old Guard" campaign was taken up by other newspapers and helped to create the climate that led to the previous Government raising the assets disregard to the new threshold of £16,000.

Given that the lead Department on the subject is now the Department of Health, I am pleased to welcome the Under-Secretary of State for Health to the Dispatch Box and congratulate him most sincerely on his appointment. He has a reputation for being sharp-witted. He is a sharp dresser, and I trust that we will hear some sharp answers to the three questions that I shall put to him, about which I told his Department earlier.

I should first set out the scale of the problem. Thanks to the growing success of the national health service, we are all living longer. The number of over-65-year-olds will have grown by 50 per cent. by 2030. In 1945, there was one pensioner for every five workers, but by 2030, there will be three pensioners for every five workers. At present, there are 330,000 people in residential care homes and 170,000 in nursing homes. The demand for both will increase substantially.

Secondly, long-term care costs are met by an accumulation of funding from the individual, social services and the NHS: £3 billion a year from private

individuals in residential care, £6 billion from local authority social services departments and £8 billion from hospital community health services. A residential care home place can cost around £250 a week, and a nursing home place £350 a week. In the London area, the costs are some 25 per cent. higher. The average cost of a complete stay per individual is £36,000 in a residential home and £26,000 for the usually shorter stay in a nursing home. Therefore, we are talking about substantial amounts of money.

The proportion of the burden falling on individuals is determined by the means test, which needs a radical overhaul, and that is the third problem. The care provided in residential and nursing homes is intended to meet almost all an individual's needs. The means test takes into account most of the resident's resources in assessing his or her contributions towards those costs.

The 1995 Budget set a new higher ceiling of £16,000 of capital assets, above which all costs needed to be met by the individual. That tapers down to £10,000, below which all the costs are met by the taxpayer.

The higher disregard limits are welcome, but they do not prevent an estimated 40,000 homes a year having to be sold in order to help to pay nursing costs, because the value of the home is generally taken into account in the means test.

There are exceptions to that. The social services authority must ignore the value of the home where it continues to be occupied by either a husband or wife or a partner who lived with someone in residential care as if they were married, or a relative who is aged 60 or over or incapacitated, or a relative under 16 whom a person in residential care is legally liable to support.

There is, however, deep and mounting public concern about the means test. Most people now own their own homes and many feel acute anxiety about having to sell them to meet all or part of their care costs. That anxiety is likely to grow in future, particularly as home ownership among people over 80, which is the group most likely to need care, is expected to rise to about 70 per cent. during the next 15 years.

There is also the vexed question of conflict between people who need care services and the ability of the local authority to pay for all those services. A final legal appeal to the House of Lords—the Gloucestershire case—looked at that conflict. The Lords judgment means that, if local authorities have insufficient resources to meet all care services demands, they can tighten the eligibility criteria for their services.

Age Concern, which campaigned hard and long on the matter, believes that that is contrary to the intention and spirit of the community care legislation to enable people to live in their own homes rather than having little option but institutional care, thus putting additional burdens on taxpayers.

Another recent High Court judgment involving the metropolitan borough of Sefton means that, if a local authority has insufficient resources, older people in homes may have to spend nearly all their savings before authorities help financially.

In a recent case concerning Somerset county council, which was reported in *The Times*, the High Court ruled that a man who had given up his job to look after his ailing mother must sell his home to pay for her care. That

landmark ruling means that people who move back into the family home to look after someone who is ill risk losing the roof over their heads if the sick relative has to move into residential care.

The implications of those judgments are alarming for anyone who has any savings or assets which may be taken to pay for care costs. They also conflict with other measures proposed by the previous Government to give some financial help and therefore partial protection of assets.

So much for the background. I now have three key questions for the Government. First, why cannot the family home be fully disregarded in the means test? If the owner goes into a residential or nursing home the family home could then be let on a shorthold tenancy from which the rent should be tax exempt if it is used to pay part of the residential or nursing home costs.

My second question relates to the previous Conservative Government's consultation paper "A New Partnership for Care in Old Age", which was published just over a year ago. It built on the success story of the tax-approved occupational and personal pension schemes, which were designed to encourage people to save for their retirement. Those incentives proved effective, and more than 17 million people are members or beneficiaries of occupational pension schemes and about 7 million people belong to personal pension schemes worth more than £600 billion in total in the United Kingdom, which is more than in the whole of the rest of the European Union put together.

The Conservative Government also proposed a new option for disregards based on the amount of money paid in premiums for immediate needs annuities. Under their proposed partnership scheme announced on 12 March, those who choose to take out partnership insurance to cover the costs of their long-term care would receive extra protection of their assets of £1.50 for every £1 of insurance value covered. Thus, £20,000 of insurance cover would protect £50,000 of assets in addition to the £16,000 means test threshold.

The partnership scheme would also provide protection for people who required care in their own home, and would help people currently in care or about to go into care. For those who cannot take advantage of the partnership scheme proposals, the state would continue to honour its obligations to provide long-term care. However, the more people who go down the insurance path, the more public money is available to assist others in real need. The House would welcome the Government's views on those proposals this evening.

My third and last question is about the Government's own plans. I looked in the Labour party's general election manifesto for a policy on funding for long-term care for the elderly. Like many other policies, it was missing. There was lots of politics but not many policies. Instead, we found a promise of yet another royal commission to work out a fair system for funding long-term care for the elderly and a charter to define standards that people could expect from health, housing and social services. I look forward this evening to hearing the Under-Secretary tell us a little more about the Government's terms for the royal commission.

I hope that the royal commission will include in its work a thorough review of the way in which local authority social services departments and local health

[Mr. Michael Colvin]

authorities determine who pays what when the criteria for help with nursing charges are met by residents. We want to see the end of the arguments that can occur between authorities over assessments and payment obligations.

When people reach old age, they want independence, choice and dignity. They do not want to be a burden on their families or the state. Many of them want to help their children by passing on some of their savings or other assets. I believe that the proposals that I have outlined would help people to achieve all those objectives. I trust that the new Government's plans will do likewise. If they do, the campaign called "The Old Guard", to which I referred earlier, will have won a victory. The continuing care conference, Age Concern, Help the Aged, the Carers National Association and the Registered Nursing Home Association, all of which have campaigned long for reform, would welcome such a move as progress. The nation as a whole—facing up to the spiralling cost of the welfare state—will raise not only a cheer but a sigh of relief.

10.13 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Mr. Paul Boateng): The quality and security of the provision made available for the long-term residential care of the elderly is the hallmark of a civilised society, and one by which we will all be judged. Therefore, in the first Adjournment debate of this Parliament, and under what all parties in the House believe will be a distinguished term of deputy speakership for you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, it is entirely fitting, right and appropriate that the House should deal with this issue, not least because it is of such particular concern to so many of our fellow citizens, who are at the age when either they are approaching it or their family members are affected by it.

The hon. Member for Romsey (Mr. Colvin) referred to the national health service and all that flows from it, and I am sure that he will understand why, as the first Labour Health Minister for 18 years to have the privilege and responsibility of addressing the House, I shall take the opportunity to set out briefly the Government's intended approach to general health policy, before I move on to deal with the specific concerns that the hon. Gentleman raised, and the three questions that he asked the Government.

The national health service is the Government's—the Labour party's—greatest achievement; it is the nation's most valued institution. It will shortly enter its 50th year, and we intend that anniversary to mark a new beginning for the service. We want our country to have a national health service of which it can feel proud again. We want a national health service in which the millions of patients who rely on it can also feel a sense of pride and value, in which the staff who work with such dedication and commitment can also join.

We must face the fact that the stewardship of the national health service by the Conservative Government, of which the hon. Member for Romsey has been a steadfast and loyal supporter these many years, has been found wanting in many respects, as has its approach to the long-term care of the elderly.

What the new Government say is that we will listen to the concerns of all the people about the national health service. We shall harness their energies and their talents

in rebuilding that sense of partnership that is essential if the NHS is again to become the envy of the world. That is why action in that regard was signalled today in the Gracious Speech, and why it lies at the heart of new Labour's vision for a new and better Britain.

However, action to review the NHS is only one part of our programme to make this country a healthier place for all our people. That is why the Prime Minister made clear today the importance that we attach to public health, which was signalled by the appointment of the Minister of State, Department of Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Ms Jowell), to take on that particular responsibility.

We are concerned to prevent people from falling ill in the first place, and to promote higher standards of public health throughout our society. We want to address the systematic causes of ill health that can affect everyone, whether those be air pollution or drug abuse, poverty or poor housing.

We must also recognise that raising the standard of public health and renewing our health care system is part of a wider programme that must be integrated. It must have within it a special place for the long-term care of the elderly, and for the interface between the NHS and the social services that is so vital if we are to get things right. We are determined to address that question too, because it lies at the heart of ensuring that we succeed in responding to the challenges that long-term care of the elderly presents.

Turning to the specifics raised by the hon. Gentleman, our policy is to ensure the best possible care for those who need it. We intend to ensure that that care is delivered in a way that focuses on outcomes for the user. We will drive up standards and ensure best value for money, and we will make sure that public money is used to deliver good-quality care for those who need it. We have already met the local government associations to begin that process. We have signalled our clear commitment in this area, and they have responded positively.

We are committed to the principle that, as far as possible, people should be given the support and services that allow them to remain at home. We recognise, as does the hon. Gentleman, the importance that people attach—particularly in their later years—to the home in which they have lived all their lives and which, if they are home owners, they hope to pass on to those they leave behind. The tragedy of Government policy in the past few years is the way in which that hope has been dashed for so many, as the hon. Gentleman recognised.

We are committed to the principles of planned care: to assessing the needs of the individual effectively and to seeing how those needs can best be met. We must recognise that there is no longer widespread confidence in the long-term care system. On the contrary, particularly with regard to residential care, there has been growing concern and a sense of insecurity that "The Old Guard" campaign—to which the hon. Gentleman referred and which he and the Under-Secretary of State for Social Security, my hon. Friend the hon. Member for Southampton, Itchen (Mr. Denham) supported—reflects. There are real worries, real fears and a demand for change.

The people feel betrayed—and rightly so. They are concerned about the cost of residential care and about seeing their lifetime's savings depleted. They are

concerned that the homes that they have worked to pay for all their working lives will be swallowed in fees. They are concerned also that, if the council does not help to pay for their residential care, they will receive second-class care that they must top up from their own pockets.

We are no longer prepared to countenance the continuation of a two-tier system. We are determined to set in place a framework that ensures a fair system and provides good-quality care for the many, not just the few. We shall promote equity of access, opportunity and choice.

I make one thing absolutely clear to the hon. Gentleman as I begin to answer his three questions: we believe in choice. Dogma will not rule the day under this new Labour Government. Such dogma has led previous Governments, which the hon. Gentleman supported, to recite time and again—so that the people of this country are sick of hearing it—the mantra that private is good and public is bad. We do not go in for that sort of dogma. I do not claim that the hon. Gentleman has recited that mantra, but he sits on the same side as those who have and he has passed through the Division Lobby time and again in support of those who have.

We have no time for dogma. We shall ask one question: how do we get best value, and what meets the care needs of the individual and the community? In asking that question, and in requiring social services departments and the national health service to address it, we believe that the public interest will be best served. Our objective is consistency and fairness. We will introduce a long-term care charter that tells people the standards and the services that they are entitled to expect from health, social services and housing. We will discuss the charter with users of the service as we prepare it, to make sure that their views are taken on board. Another difference between this new Government and the previous Government is that we believe in consultation and in listening to the people.

The previous Government, who were recently so resoundingly defeated at the polls, belatedly began a process of consultation on insurance provision as a response to the crisis in long-term care. I must tell the hon. Member for Romsey that the overwhelming message from the responses received to that consultation was hostile to the previous Government's proposals. The responses were hostile because people saw the proposals as piecemeal and unfair, and because they believed that the taxpayer would, in effect, be required to subsidise the private insurance industry. We will not go down that road.

We want to work for the many and not for the few, and I am here to tell the hon. Member for Romsey that we will not proceed with the previous Government's proposals in

that regard. We are looking for a new way forward and, in due course, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will outline how we propose to consult and to engage the skills, enthusiasm and commitment of the many voluntary and private sector institutions, local authorities, academia and others that have addressed their minds to the challenges that exist in the provision of care for the elderly.

We recognise that there are no easy answers, and it is a mistake to believe that there are. I know that the hon. Member for Romsey, who has made a particular study of this matter and has real concerns, does not make that mistake. There are costs and charges that must be borne by the Revenue and we have a duty to protect taxpayers' money, as well as to ensure equity, fairness and universality in the provision of care. We will do that. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will announce how we intend to take forward our manifesto commitments in this area. The hon. Member for Romsey need have no fear on that score.

There will be an opportunity for the hon. Member to make such input as he sees fit to the process, which will be designed to arrive at a genuine national consensus around this issue. For us, consensus is not a dirty word. For us, consensus on how we provide for our senior citizens—"The Old Guard", as they have been described in the Southampton campaign—is a critical issue that we do not intend to shirk. He will have an opportunity to put forward his interesting proposals. I tend to feel that they are flawed in respect of the potential burden they place on the Exchequer, and in terms of the disparity of treatment between those who have houses capable of being let and those who do not. Nevertheless, his proposals are welcome and will be considered in due course.

The debate will continue, and we are grateful to the hon. Member for Romsey for enabling it to take place tonight. As I have outlined, we will ensure that the universality and equality of access that are vital to a fair system of residential care—working in the interests of the many, not the few—will be safeguarded. On this, the first day of a new Parliament, we can and must look to the future and not allow ourselves to be buried in the battles of the past. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will seize the opportunity in the campaign in which he and my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Social Security are engaged to work together with the public and independent sectors to arrive at a better provision for those whose age or infirmity require—

The motion having been made after Ten o'clock, and the debate having continued for half an hour, MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER adjourned the House without Question put, pursuant to the Standing Order.

Adjourned accordingly at half-past Ten o'clock.



House of Commons

Thursday 15 May 1997

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Members Sworn

The following Members took and subscribed the Oath, or made and subscribed the Affirmation required by law:

Right honourable Thomas Clarke, CBE, Coatbridge and Chryston

Teresa Ellen, Mrs. Gorman, Billericay

Right honourable John Selwyn Gummer, Suffolk, Coastal

Business of the House

2.37 pm

Mr. Alastair Goodlad (Eddisbury): May I ask the Leader of the House to give us the business for next week, please?

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Ann Taylor): Before I give the House details of business for next week, perhaps I could make a few preliminary comments about how I intend to handle business questions in future. I hope that I shall be able to maintain the convention that was started by my predecessor of giving the House as much notice as possible of future business, not just of one week's business. I also hope, when possible, to give early notice of major debates.

In the normal run of business I shall, of course, seek to avoid taking highly contentious matters on a Thursday evening—particularly one preceding a constituency Friday—but that may not always be possible, particularly in the early days of a new Parliament.

Right hon. and hon. Members may also like to be reminded that the ballot for private Members' Bills will take place next Thursday and that hon. Members can enter their name in the ballot while the House is sitting next Tuesday and Wednesday.

May I also say, in anticipation of questions, that we hope to make early progress on the establishment of Select Committees.

As the House is aware, the debate on the Address in reply to the Gracious Speech will be brought to a conclusion on Tuesday 20 May. Madam Speaker may select amendments on Monday as well as on Tuesday.

The business following the conclusion of the debate on the Humble Address will be as follows:

WEDNESDAY 21 MAY—Until 2 pm, there will be debates on the motion for the Adjournment of the House, including the traditional three-hour debate before any recess.

ON WEDNESDAY AND UNTIL ABOUT 7 PM ON THURSDAY 22 MAY—Second Reading of the Referendums (Scotland and Wales) Bill.

Afterwards, there will be a debate on the need for modernisation of House of Commons procedure on a motion for the Adjournment of the House.

The House will also wish to know that, subject to the progress of business, it will be proposed that the House will rise for the spring Adjournment on Thursday 22 May until Monday 2 June. I am unable today to give the House precise details of the business to be taken in the first week back after the recess, but I anticipate that, on Monday 2 June, we shall have the Second Reading of a Government Bill and that other important Government business will be taken during the course of that week.

Mr. Goodlad: I thank the Leader of the House for giving us the business, I congratulate her most warmly on her appointment and I wish her, on behalf of the Opposition, every success in her new responsibilities.

Will the Leader of the House confirm that the abandonment of the normal convention of two weeks elapsing between the publication of a Bill and its Second Reading, as in the case of the Referendums (Scotland and Wales) Bill, will be the exception rather than the rule? Will she also confirm that the Committee stage of that Bill will be taken on the Floor of the House, as will the proposed Bills on the establishment of a devolved Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly, if approval is obtained in the referendums, the legislation to incorporate into UK law the main provisions of the European convention on human rights, the legislation to provide for a directly elected strategic authority and a directly elected mayor of London, the Bill, if one is introduced, to amend the European Communities Act 1972, the Bill to change the responsibilities of the Bank of England and any other legislation with constitutional implications?

Will the right hon. Lady tell the House whether she proposes to lay a consultation document before the House before the debate next Thursday on House of Commons procedure?

Will the right hon. Lady guarantee that the Foreign Secretary will make an oral statement to the House at the earliest possible opportunity on the restoration of trade union rights to Government communications headquarters, Cheltenham, which we have learnt about from the media? It is a matter that has serious potential implications for the security of the nation.

Will the right hon. Lady also arrange for the Secretary of State for National Heritage to make a statement on the events leading to Lord MacLaurin's resignation as chairman of the Test and County Cricket Board as a result of the intemperate remarks of the Minister for sport?

Is the Leader of the House aware that, in 1995, the Select Committee on Procedure, including all its Labour members, examined the conduct of Prime Minister's Question Time and opposed switching from two sessions a week to one? Can she explain why the Government have decided to reject that judgment and why they did not consult the House on their decision? Would it not have been more appropriate for the proposed new special Select Committee announced in the Queen's Speech to examine parliamentary procedure and to consider the change? Will

[Mr. Goodlad]

the Leader of the House now defer implementation of the proposed change until the Committee has been set up and has had time to consider it?

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): Speed it up, Duracell.

Mr. Goodlad: I am afraid that the hon. Gentleman will have to learn to listen to the Opposition, as the nation has had to suffer listening to him for many years.

Will the Leader of the House confirm that the Government will be prepared to revise the proposed oral question rota for the current Session in the light of the quite extraordinary diminution in the time available for Scottish questions, which is down to 45 minutes; for Northern Ireland questions, which are allocated a mere half an hour; for Welsh questions, again a mere half an hour; for Environment questions, just over half an hour; and for Transport questions, under half an hour? Those erosions of the rights of hon. Members to question Ministers in important Departments appear to represent a serious intention further to diminish the Government's accountability to the House.

Finally, will the Leader of the House arrange for the Chancellor of the Exchequer to make an immediate statement to the House as to the arrangements whereby the Bank of England will be accountable to Parliament for the execution of its responsibilities in respect of interest rates? Is she aware that the Government have abandoned a tried and tested monetary policy—the most successful that Britain has had for many years—and substituted a nominated quango, the monetary committee, with decisions taken by a majority vote substituted for proper ministerial accountability to the House on a vital matter? Is she aware that the Government's failure to come to the House with their decision is yet another unfortunate omen for the relationship between the Government and Parliament?

Mrs. Taylor: I begin by thanking the right hon. Gentleman for his comments and his welcome to me as Leader of the House. Let me reciprocate by saying that he is now acting shadow Leader of the House as well as Opposition Chief Whip and, as we all know, Chief Whips are not allowed to make speeches. That may be one reason why the right hon. Gentleman asked so many questions and spoke at such length.

I shall try to deal with all the points that the right hon. Gentleman raised. He asked first about the two weeks that normally elapse between the publication of a Bill and its Second Reading. He will know that the decision to take the Referendums (Scotland and Wales) Bill next week resulted from discussions through the usual channels and I understand that the Opposition are happy with that. It is not a precedent for any other Second Readings. It is a straightforward, simple and short Bill for which the Government have a clear mandate. I can give the right hon. Gentleman an assurance that the remaining stages of the Bill will be taken on the Floor of the House.

The other points that the right hon. Gentleman raised about the devolution Bills were answered yesterday by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister. I do not accept that all the Bills that the right hon. Gentleman declared as constitutional fall into that category. However, the way in

which constitutional Bills are handled in future can fall within the remit of the Select Committee on modernisation of parliamentary procedures that we hope to establish soon.

The right hon. Gentleman asked whether a document could be produced before next Thursday's debate on the modernisation of our procedures. I do not intend to issue any document. We have set out in various policy statements in recent months some of the ideas that we should like to consider, but the objective of the debate is to listen to ideas from hon. Members on both sides of the House. I hope that hon. Members will contribute to the debate and that we can make progress quite quickly.

The right hon. Gentleman requested an oral statement from my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary on trade union rights at GCHQ, but I do not think that it is necessary to have one. It is not a change of Government policy, but the implementation of a promise that was made in our manifesto. The right hon. Gentleman's remarks about national security are a dreadful slur on the people who work at GCHQ and he should not be calling their patriotism into question.

I am not sure whether the resignation from, and vacancy on, the Test and County Cricket Board, on which the right hon. Gentleman commented, has implications for national security. The matter is not foremost in the Government's mind, although we can see why it might be of interest to certain Opposition Members, especially the former Prime Minister, who I am sure has been able to find more time for the activity recently.

As to the right hon. Gentleman's comments about my hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Mr. Skinner), my impression is that the nation enjoys listening to my hon. Friend. I am sure that his contributions will be as forceful as ever in this Parliament.

The right hon. Gentleman raised issues about Prime Minister's Question Time and the Question Time rota. I know of no one who thought that the old system of Prime Minister's Question Time was satisfactory. The right hon. Gentleman will know that there was general disagreement about it. Had we not moved quickly to make changes, given the House's habit, there might have been no change at all. We know how the old system worked; we shall see how the new one works. The new Committee will be able to review the system as time progresses.

On Scottish, Northern Ireland and Welsh questions, my right hon. Friends the Secretaries of State for Scotland and for Wales have made it clear that ample time will be provided in other arenas, especially the Scottish Grand Committee, for questions. I absolutely reject the contention that Scottish and Welsh Members can ask questions only during Scottish and Welsh Question Times. The right hon. Gentleman forgot to point out that Treasury, Home Office and Defence Question Times have been extended. In actual fact, the amount of time provided for scrutiny of the Executive is exactly the same as it has always been; there is no difference in time whatever.

The decision by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer on the Bank of England has been widely welcomed. There will be a debate on the economy during the debate on the Queen's Speech, and points can be put to my right hon. Friend at that time.

Mr. Robert Sheldon (Ashton-under-Lyne): I offer my congratulations to my right hon. Friend the Leader of the

House, and particularly welcome her continuation of the rule that we shall be given two weeks' notice of business every Thursday. She will of course have read the Liaison Committee's final report of the previous Parliament, in which it called for the early establishment of Select Committees rather than the long, protracted arrangements that have been common in the past. I welcome her assurance that she will set up the Committees quickly. Will she give some idea of the progress of the timetable?

Mrs. Taylor: I welcome my right hon. Friend's comments. I hope that we shall make early progress on establishing Select Committees. We intend to enter very quickly into discussions about that. Some decisions have to be made about the number of Select Committees, especially where Departments have been merged, or indeed separated. I regard Select Committee work as very important to the House and hope that we can make progress in the very near future.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): I congratulate, from the Liberal Democrat Benches, the new Leader of the House and welcome her translation from one side of the House to the other. Will she address herself particularly to the difference in arithmetic in the House and use her good offices to ensure that the access gained by those of us in the third party—a major third party—to the business and progress of legislation is commensurate with the size of our party? I welcome her firm statement that she will repeat the practice of her predecessor to give as much advance notice of business as possible. I also welcome the assurance that she has just given the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon) about progress on Select Committees.

The question of the Select Committee on the modernisation of the procedures of the House is obviously extremely urgent if we are to approach all the business that the Government have put before us in the Gracious Speech with the greatest speed. If that Select Committee is not made operational speedily, we shall clearly have great difficulty in dealing with all the other business. I also ask whether the right hon. Lady feels that the short debate next week—it might be only two and a half hours—will be adequate to give the new Select Committee guidance on the views of the whole House. Modernisation is one subject on which all Members, new and old, may have a view so that business may be expedited.

Mrs. Taylor: I am grateful for the hon. Member's comments. I appreciate his point about the arithmetic of the House, which will be especially significant in certain areas, such as the Scottish Grand Committee and the Welsh Grand Committee. We accept that the balance has changed and we shall have to consider the implications. I said that I will give two weeks' notice whenever possible, but I hope that the House will accept, as I accepted when in opposition, that on occasions it will not be possible. Two weeks' notice should be our target and endeavour.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned Select Committees and I hope that we can move on all of them quickly, especially the Select Committee on modernisation, which should be set up as soon as possible. The debate next Thursday is not intended to be the last opportunity for hon. Members to make an input with their ideas for modernisation.

I hope that many hon. Members will participate in suggesting changes to improve the workings of Parliament.

Mr. Andrew F. Bennett (Denton and Reddish): I congratulate the new Leader of the House. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that, while we were electioneering, civil servants were busily turning out statutory instruments? How many are now waiting to be scrutinised by the House? How quickly does she expect the Joint Committee on Statutory Instruments to be set up to start the process of scrutiny?

Mrs. Taylor: My hon. Friend is well known for his interest in that matter. He has done sterling work on the Joint Committee in the past and perhaps may do so in the future. We inherited 60 statutory instruments and 11 have been tabled in the past two days. The Joint Committee needs to be established as soon as possible to make progress and to ensure that we do not have too great a backlog of statutory instruments piling up.

Sir Peter Emery (East Devon): I congratulate the right hon. Lady on taking up the office that she shadowed. I have two questions. The first concerns the debate on Thursday. She will recall that the Procedure Committee pressed her for some time to reveal her thoughts on reform so that it could consider them. Nothing came to the Procedure Committee. I agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Mr. Goodlad) that some statement from the Government should be put before the House before the debate tomorrow, because we do not know anything about their thinking on the issue of reform. It is most important that a statement should be available before the debate starts.

Secondly, I return to the backdoor introduction of the single day for Prime Minister's questions. May I remind the right hon. Lady of the statement made to the Select Committee about Prime Minister's questions at

"3.15 on Tuesdays and Thursdays. These sessions are however a fundamental part of our parliamentary democracy and part of that is now familiar to the public?"

That statement did not come from a Conservative politician; it was given to the Procedure Committee by the present Prime Minister. We are moving away from that and, in my judgment, we should have a proper debate on an amendable motion and not an Adjournment debate.

Mrs. Taylor: The right hon. Gentleman knows that the debate on modernisation is not tomorrow, but a week today. I do not think that it would be appropriate for me to produce a paper for that debate, because its purpose is to give me a chance to listen to the ideas that hon. Members might have. It is not the Government's intention to impose change on the House: we want to listen to what is said.

On that issue, the right hon. Gentleman, as Chairman of the Procedure Committee, will know two things. He will know that we stated clearly in the manifesto not that we would reform the entire House of Commons in a particular way, but that we would change Prime Minister's questions. That was made clear in the manifesto. The right hon. Gentleman will know that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister gave evidence to the Procedure Committee suggesting that changes along the lines that we are now introducing should be made.

[Mrs. Taylor]

Other hon. Members may not have read my right hon. Friend's evidence to the Procedure Committee, but I am sure that the right hon. Gentleman did.

The changes that we are proposing to Prime Minister's Question Time will not reduce, but will slightly increase, the number of questions that my right hon. Friend can deal with, and will improve accountability by making Prime Minister's Question Time a more serious affair.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): As the former Government Chief Whip rather disagreeably raised the Government's welcome decision on GCHQ, and considering that he did so in terms of national security, could my right hon. Friend find out what access Ministers have to the original papers, which led to Mrs. Thatcher and Sir Geoffrey Howe's extraordinary decision?

Mr. John M. Taylor (Solihull): What about the Belgiano?

Mr. Dalyell: Well, it was about that—the extraordinary decision out of the blue to cast aspersions on loyal people working for the Government? Had that not much more to do with political embarrassment, and not much to do with national security?

Mrs. Taylor: Not for the first time, my hon. Friend is entirely right. All Labour Members deplore any accusation that those who work at GCHQ are less than patriotic.

Mr. Tom King (Bridgwater): I welcome the right hon. Lady to her post as Leader of the House—a uniquely different position from that held by any of her colleagues, in that she has a responsibility to all Members of the House, which I am sure that she will seek to discharge. I much prefer her recent remark that the Government would not impose any changes on the House, to her earlier remark when she suggested that nothing could be done in the House if it involved consultation.

May I suggest to the right hon. Lady what will already be apparent to her: that the decisions about a Select Committee and a debate are welcome, and that the best thing that she could do to start her period of office with the good will of the entire House would be to agree to withdraw the proposal for the change in Prime Minister's questions, not to challenge the possible merits, but to ensure that the proper process of consultation is observed? When she sat on the Opposition Benches, she would have insisted on that with all her customary vigour.

Mrs. Taylor: On the last point, there were many occasions when the previous Government did not consult on matters on which we thought that there should be consultation. I agree with the right hon. Gentleman that the Leader of the House has responsibilities to all Members. The Government have accepted certain approaches that will be for the benefit of all Members. For example, we made it clear in the Queen's Speech that we wanted wider consultation on some extremely important policy areas. We have also made it clear that we want to publish some Bills in draft form to permit wide consultation. We have even suggested pre-legislative

and other Committees to examine proposed legislation in a different way. Those are constructive proposals, which the modernisation Committee can consider. We can make progress on those matters.

As to Prime Minister's questions, I have nothing to add, except to say that I believe that if we had not made the change now, the old processes would have come into play and the change would never have taken place.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): I strongly congratulate my right hon. Friend on her appointment as Leader of the House of Commons, and it gives us great pleasure to see her in her place after all these years. Much of the Hamilton affair remains outstanding. Will she give precedence to setting up the Committee on Standards and Privileges before the other Select Committees so that there will be no delay and to ensure that early justice can be done?

Mrs. Taylor: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments. He is absolutely right that to say that it would be for the benefit of the House as a whole to have the Committee on Standards and Privileges established at an early date so that all the outstanding work that that Committee will inherit can be done quickly. I hope that there will be no delay and that we receive co-operation from all parties in establishing that Committee.

Sir Norman Fowler (Sutton Coldfield): Does the Leader of the House agree that, at the very least, there should be a debate on Prime Minister's questions before any new system is introduced? Is not the point that this decision has been made entirely without consultation and entirely for the benefit of the Prime Minister so as to protect him from questions? Is not her job to decide what is in the best interests of the House of Commons?

Mrs. Taylor: The right hon. Gentleman does not seem to realise that the previous Government missed an opportunity to debate Prime Minister's questions, which they could have done on the basis of the report from the Procedure Committee which was published last year. The reason he gives for the change is not valid, as my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister is not much in need of protection from Opposition Members.

Mr. Skinner: Will my right hon. Friend try to arrange business during the next two or three weeks—before the first leadership ballot for the Tory pretender—so that each of the contestants can get equal time at the Dispatch Box and so, in the interests of fairness and consultation, we allow them all to have an equal say?

Mrs. Taylor: I am certainly willing to receive representations from any Opposition Member who feels that there is any injustice in respect of the balance of time given to the various contenders. Perhaps my hon. Friend could be appointed the referee.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): In warmly endorsing the welcome given to the right hon. Lady in her unique role—a role to which my right hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater (Mr. King) referred—may I ask her to think again about next Thursday's debate? If we are to have procedural reform, should it not be at a measured pace? Should we not have a full day's debate,

and should not that debate take place after the Government have set out their own general views? In that context, can she clarify some of the rumours in the press about the timing and the length of the forthcoming long recess?

Mrs. Taylor: I would ideally have liked to have given extra time for that debate, but it is important that we get moving as quickly as possible. There will always be claims for extra time. As I have said, this will not be the only opportunity for Members to contribute ideas on how the workings of Parliament might be modernised. I am afraid that, at this stage, I can say nothing about the long recess.

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): May I congratulate my right hon. Friend on becoming Leader of the House? It must be pleasing for her, and it follows on from Bolton Wanderers—the football team that she strongly supports—winning promotion to the premiership. As a previous member of the Procedure Committee, I should like to ask her a serious question concerning the Committee's report on the way in which the House deals with European legislation. The Committee produced a unanimous report which recommended improvements to the method we use to deal with European legislation. Will the Government now respond to that report, or will it be looked at—along with other matters—by the new fast-track procedure Committee that she proposes and that I fully support?

Mrs. Taylor: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his comments—especially for being the first to mention Bolton Wanderers in the new Parliament. I congratulate him on his work on the previous Procedure Committee. What he says about European legislation is quite right, and concerns about the way in which we deal with it are shared by hon. Members on both sides of the House. I hope that we shall be able to look at that quickly and make progress.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): I join others in welcoming the Leader of the House to her new role, which involves protecting the rights of all hon. Members. When she dealt with Question Time, however, she forgot about Northern Ireland, and made no mention of that Secretary of State. Perhaps that was a slip of the tongue. Could the Leader of the House have a chat with you, Madam Speaker? You would then be able to share with her the difficulty of fitting in all the questioners in 45 minutes—and that 45 minutes has now been reduced. I think that the consequential changes to Prime Minister's Question Time cause us the most concern.

Will the Leader of the House also bear it in mind, when thinking of the long recess, that school holidays in Scotland and Northern Ireland are different from those in the rest of the United Kingdom?

Mrs. Taylor: I acknowledge the hon. Gentleman's last point, which my colleagues representing Scottish constituencies are not slow to make to me. I can only say that, as we have a new Parliament, this year may not be as easy as other years, but we should always bear such factors in mind when planning future business.

I have made clear my view that the needs of minority parties must be taken into account. The issue of Northern Ireland questions was difficult, because Northern Ireland

questions preceded Prime Minister's questions on a Thursday: we had to decide whether to switch them to a different day and give them 45 minutes, or to give them the 30-minute slot before Prime Minister's questions. There was a feeling that the high-profile slot before Prime Minister's questions would be preferable, but we are always willing to consider other ideas intended to improve the overall position.

Mr. Harry Barnes (North-East Derbyshire): We have all just been through the interesting experience of a general election, which I am sure my right hon. Friend enjoyed. Some may have learnt some lessons from that experience, and some may not; but one of the lessons that many of us learned was that the electoral register was not in a healthy condition. Should we not be able to discuss our experiences in the election in a debate, so that we can consider ways of introducing a decent system?

Mrs. Taylor: My hon. Friend made his views clear before the election, and I think that some of his concerns were vindicated. I believe that there are problems with the electoral register, and I think that everyone would want to ensure that every person who is entitled to vote is, as far as possible, allowed to exercise that right.

On a personal note, I think that the election produced some other interesting experiences in connection with the design of the ballot paper. I am sure that all of us who were candidates will want to learn from those experiences, and, perhaps, propose changes for the future.

Mr. John MacGregor (South Norfolk): I, too, warmly congratulate the right hon. Lady on her appointment to an important and challenging post.

May I return to the issue of Prime Minister's questions? It is not an issue of prime ministerial diktat: it is an issue of the Prime Minister's accountability to the House. It would have been wise to involve the House in the changes, which are not just about timing. Other issues are involved in the handling of Prime Minister's questions.

Does the right hon. Lady recall that, when we were in government with large majorities, we always made sure that we consulted widely on reforms to the House? For example, when I set up the Jopling Committee, I was anxious to ensure that all quarters in the House were represented, and it was the unanimity on the report's recommendation that enabled it to go through with relative speed. Would the right hon. Lady not be wise to recall that?

Given the right hon. Lady's earlier comment that she wanted to listen to what had been said, has she listened carefully to what has been said about Prime Minister's questions today, and will she incorporate it in Select Committee procedures?

Mrs. Taylor: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his opening comments. He is, however, the sixth person to raise the issue of Prime Minister's questions, and I do not think that anyone has defended the old procedure. I think that we must all admit that the old system of two 15-minute sessions did not hold the Prime Minister or the Government to account. It may have had entertainment value, but I think that Prime Minister's questions are too important for that.

[Mrs. Taylor]

I agree with the right hon. Gentleman that other issues surrounding Prime Minister's questions should perhaps be examined in time, such as the notice of questions that is given and the transfer of closed questions.

I believe that the House would want to express a view on those issues, and I hope that that can be done. The right hon. Gentleman says that he consulted widely and that the Jopling proposals were speedily introduced, but I must remind him that it was at least two years before those proposals saw the light of day.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): Does my right hon. Friend accept that if there were to be a statement next week on GCHQ, it would give us an opportunity to praise warmly all those who fought the ban there, refused to be intimidated and gave up their jobs? People such as Mike Grindley should be congratulated, and I hope that he can be given an award.

As regards patriotism, is my right hon. Friend aware that two years before the ban all those at GCHQ were congratulated by the director-general on the way in which they had carried out their duties during the Falklands war? Surely such people, including Mike Grindley, need no lessons in patriotism from the Conservative bunch opposite.

Mrs. Taylor: I agree that the people who work at GCHQ need no lessons in patriotism. They demonstrated their attitude well, and I believe that the Foreign Secretary's announcement will be widely welcomed.

Mr. Edward Garnier (Harborough): I, too, congratulate the right hon. Lady on her new appointment. Given the shortness of the debate on procedure on Thursday week, would not it be sensible, and a better use of our time, if the Government, or the Labour party, were to crystallise their thoughts on procedural reforms on paper in advance of the debate? Will the Leader of the House or a senior Government Back Bencher chair the proposed Select Committee on procedure, and what will be its political make-up?

Mrs. Taylor: I thank the hon. and learned Gentleman for his opening remarks. I believe that I have answered the question about the wisdom of providing a Government document: I am sure that the various Labour party documents were well scrutinised by the Conservative party during the general election campaign, and they obviously did not include enough clangers to make the Opposition take any notice of them. I do not think that it would be appropriate to have a paper: it will be a listening debate.

The membership, composition and political balance of the modernisation Committee have yet to be decided.

Dr. Norman A. Godman (Greenock and Inverclyde): These are early days, but is my right hon. Friend in a position to say when the first meeting of the Scottish Grand Committee will take place? Will it be in London or in Edinburgh? Does she have any idea who will occupy the Opposition Front Bench—members of the Scottish National party or Scottish Liberal Democrats?

Mrs. Taylor: My hon. Friend is right to say that there will be different faces, not representatives of the official

Opposition, on the Opposition Front Bench. That is why I acknowledged earlier, in response to the hon. Member for Northern Cornwall (Mr. Tyler), that the arithmetic resulting from the general election meant that we would have to review the situation. That review will take place, and we shall hold consultations in the very near future.

Mr. James Wallace (Orkney and Shetland): I congratulate the right hon. Lady on her appointment. She will be aware that the previous Government failed to achieve their objective of forming a blocking minority to stop measures that will lead to significant reductions in the British fishing fleet. Will there be an opportunity to discuss the implications of that, preferably before the intergovernmental conference? There is cross-party agreement that the important issues of quota hopping and reform of the common fisheries policy must be tackled.

Mrs. Taylor: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his opening remarks. We acknowledge that the fishing industry faces major problems and that action must be taken. Those issues will be discussed at the intergovernmental conference, and we hope to have a debate about the IGC before it takes place.

Mr. Mike Gapes (Ilford, South): I, too, congratulate my right hon. Friend. May I add my support to that of my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon) for the early establishment of Select Committees? May I draw her attention to the final report of the Foreign Affairs Committee in the previous Parliament, which emphasised that several important international questions will be coming up in the next few weeks? Early establishment of the Foreign Affairs Committee is especially important so that we can monitor what happens.

Mrs. Taylor: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's comments. I accept his point that we need to get all Select Committees established as quickly as possible. I realise that different hon. Members have different priorities. The only solution is to try to get moving on all the Select Committees as soon as we can.

Mr. Tim Yeo (South Suffolk): Will the right hon. Lady confirm that the Prime Minister did not consult any Back-Bench Member before announcing changes to Prime Minister's questions? Will she apologise on behalf of the Prime Minister for that gross discourtesy to the House? Does she agree that the arrogance of the Prime Minister's behaviour in this matter makes a mockery of his reported claim that he wishes his Government to be the servant and not the master?

Mrs. Taylor: I am pretty sure that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister did not consult the hon. Gentleman, but I reject the rest of his remarks.

Mr. Alex Salmond (Banff and Buchan): The Leader of the House said that she might reconsider the cut in time allocated to Northern Irish questions. Is she prepared to extend that reconsideration to the other national Departments? The cut is causing concern and was not in the Labour party manifesto. I welcome the fact that the new Minister for sport is proving as controversial in office as he did on the Back Benches. Will he make a statement

on his proposal for a single British football side, which is causing consternation north of the border? Cutting Scottish questions is one thing; cutting the national side is quite another. We hope that he had his fingers crossed when he made the statement.

Mrs. Taylor: Scottish Members have an opportunity to ask questions at times other than Scottish questions. Scottish questions will still be 45 minutes. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland has made it clear that there will be opportunities to ask questions in the Scottish Grand Committee. I hope that hon. Members will use those opportunities. I have said that we are considering the balance of the Scottish Grand Committee and the problem of the absence of official Opposition Members. On the football team, I have a keen interest but I shall not comment on it now, except to say that it is National Heritage questions next week.

Mr. John Townend (East Yorkshire): I congratulate the right hon. Lady on her appointment. Further to her reply to the hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr. Wallace), may I strongly urge her to provide time in the near future for a debate on fishing? There is a great fear in the industry that the Government are about to sell it down the river. They have already abandoned the previous Government's commitment to make the ending of quota hopping a priority at the intergovernmental conference. The Fisheries Minister is talking about reducing our catching capacity by 30 per cent. with no extra money for decommissioning, and is warning the industry that it will have to limit its days at sea. That means that my fishermen's livelihoods are at risk.

Mrs. Taylor: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his first comment. His statement that the Government are about to sell fishermen down the river is a bit rich coming from someone who supported the Conservative Government while so much damage was done to the fishing industry. This Government intend to pursue policies to deal with the problems of the fishing industry. We have made it clear that we will play a positive role in negotiating long-overdue improvements to the common fisheries policy.

Mr. Michael Fallon (Sevenoaks): Will the Leader of the House explain why the Government failed to consult even Madam Speaker before announcing changes to Prime Minister's questions? Was that a deliberate omission or an oversight for which she has apologised?

Mrs. Taylor: There has been significant misinterpretation of what Madam Speaker said yesterday. She made it clear that her consent was not required; she did not say that she was not consulted.

Dr. Liam Fox (Woodspring): I add my congratulations to the right hon. Lady. Given that it is clear that the Government intend to push through changes to Prime Minister's questions without consulting the House, may we have a debate on accountability in government so that we can tell the Prime Minister, while we are still allowed to do so, that Prime Minister's questions is about bringing him to account and is not a gift to be given as part of some personal fiefdom?

Mrs. Taylor: Again, it comes a bit rich from hon. Members who were in the House when the Government

Benches were occupied by the Conservative party to talk about Government accountability, because that was when the Scott report was published. The amount of time allocated to Prime Minister's questions has not been reduced; the session has been made more sensible and purposeful.

Mr. John M. Taylor: Will the Leader of the House ask the President of the Board of Trade to make an early statement from the Dispatch Box about the guiding principles of the Government's policy on monopolies and mergers, and competition policy? Those are crucial areas of economic superintendence and the President of the Board of Trade should make a statement from the Dispatch Box on the issue at an early date.

Mrs. Taylor: The competition Bill was mentioned in the Queen's Speech and there will be opportunities to discuss the matter on the Floor of the House once the Bill is published.

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (North Essex): May I add my congratulations to the right hon. Lady? Will she join me in paying tribute to her predecessor, who did so much and served that office extremely well on behalf of the whole House? Will she reflect on the fact that, when the previous Parliament expanded the role of the Scottish and Welsh Grand Committees, it was not intended to substitute that scrutiny for scrutiny in the House? The idea that cross-examination by largely friendly Members of Parliament north of the border in the Scottish Grand Committee is a substitute for cross-examination of Ministers by Conservative Members who nevertheless represent the aspirations of 500,000 voters in Scotland emphasises that the Government seek to protect Ministers from proper accountability to the House.

Mrs. Taylor: I am more than happy to join the hon. Gentleman in paying tribute to the work of my predecessor, Tony Newton, as I did at the end of the last Session. His occupancy of my position did great service to the House. We should be grateful for what he did, and I am happy to have that placed on record.

On the hon. Gentleman's comments about affairs in Scotland and Wales, it is extremely difficult for Labour Members to take lessons from Conservative Members about Scotland or Wales.

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip-Northwood): Will the right hon. Lady ensure that the Deputy Prime Minister, in his capacity as Secretary of State for Transport, comes to the Dispatch Box at an early date to make a statement on Her Majesty's Government's attitude towards the proposed alliance between British and American airlines and on progress between the United States Government and the UK Government on a new air service agreement? Will she confirm that those matters will be decided by the Government, not by Neil Kinnock in Brussels?

Mrs. Taylor: The hon. Gentleman makes allegations at the end of his questions which should not have been made, but I shall draw his general comments to the attention of my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister. I am not sure whether a statement is needed,

[Mrs. Taylor]

but I shall ensure that my right hon. Friend is aware of those points. He will wind up the Queen's Speech debate next week.

Mr. Nigel Waterson (Eastbourne): May I ask the right hon. Lady whether, in her new role, she has made representations to the Chancellor about his hasty and ill-considered decision to abandon direct democratic control of the fixing of interest rates without preceding that by a debate or at least a statement in the House?

Mrs. Taylor: No, I have not.

Mr. Nick Hawkins (Surrey Heath): May I join in the congratulations to the right hon. Lady on her new appointment but also join calls made by the Scottish National party for the new Minister for sport to make a statement to the House? Does she agree that his short tenure of that position so far has included, first, an obviously insincere taking of the oath and specious excuses—totally unconvincingly made—when he realised that that had been caught on camera and, secondly, the resignation of an extremely distinguished man as chairman of the Sports Council? Coupled with what the leader of the Scottish National party referred to—turning upside down the prospects for football in this country—is it not already clear that the new Sports Minister will have the second shortest tenure of office in the new Government, beaten only by the right hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Mr. Foster), who could stomach the new Government for only three days before leaving?

Mr. Mike Hall (Weaver Vale): How long did the hon. Gentleman stay in Blackpool?

Mr. Hawkins: Five years.

Mrs. Taylor: I think that the intervention answers the point rather well. I reject that criticism of my hon. Friend, and I welcome the hon. Member to his new seat.

Mr. David Lidington (Aylesbury): Although I congratulate the right hon. Lady on her appointment, does she agree that one consequence of the Government's announcement of changes to Prime Minister's questions is to halve the opportunities available each week for the Leader of the Opposition or, for that matter, the leaders of the other parties in the House, to hold the Prime Minister to account? Surely she accepts that that amounts to a serious diminution in the accountability of the Executive to the legislature.

Mrs. Taylor: That is patent nonsense.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): I welcome the right hon. Lady to her position. She said earlier that she did not want to impose any changes on the House, but does she not realise that that is exactly what she has done by changing the format of Prime Minister's Question Time without consultation? She has also said that she is now prepared to consult other hon. Members because of the problems posed by cutting the time available for Scottish and Welsh questions. If she had consulted at the very beginning, such problems would not exist.

Prime Minister's questions is not only an opportunity for Conservative Back Benchers to question the Prime Minister; it is an opportunity for all Back-Bench Members to question him. Surely, therefore, any changes that take place should involve consultation with the whole House. Is not this one of the first examples of new Labour: big majority; enormous arrogance?

Mrs. Taylor: I think that the hon. Gentleman should learn something about humility in light of the decision by the electorate a fortnight ago. As for the rota for Question Time, perhaps I might remind the House that it has never been fixed in stone. It is not part of the Standing Orders of the House. The rota is always determined by the Government, and it changes when Departments merge or separate.

We are always willing to hear representations about how Question Time generally could be improved, and I hope that the new Select Committee will consider such matters. I must tell the hon. Gentleman that we are all very aware that it will not just be Conservative Members who will wish to question the Prime Minister.

Mr. David Trimble (Upper Bann): May I, too, also congratulate the right hon. Lady on her new post? May I also welcome the indication that she gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Belfast, South (Rev. Martin Smyth) that she is prepared to look again at the time available for questions on the other constituent parts of the United Kingdom?

When can we expect the Northern Ireland Grand Committee to sit? Will it provide other opportunities for us to hold the Government to account through questions because, as I am sure the right hon. Lady knows, there is a greater need for accountability in Northern Ireland because of the much wider range of responsibilities of the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland in the absence of local government in Northern Ireland and the absence, for the moment, of any proposals by the Government for devolution? Bearing in mind the right hon. Lady's comments on the Scottish Grand Committee, will she look at the arrangements for the Northern Ireland Grand Committee so that it can reflect where those from the largest party of Northern Ireland happen to sit?

Mrs. Taylor: I know that there will always be questions about the balance on the Grand Committees and I know that different hon. Members have different views. It will be difficult to balance all those interests and to satisfy everyone. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will acknowledge that we appreciate the need for proper accountability in Northern Ireland. I hope that he will also acknowledge that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland has kept in close touch with everyone about the range of issues involved.

On the specific question about the rota for parliamentary questions, all I would ask the hon. Gentleman and, indeed, everyone else, to bear in mind is that were there to be an increase in the time allocated for questions on one matter, there would have to be a decrease in the time available for questions on another matter.

Mrs. Margaret Ewing (Moray): May I ask a question relating to Select Committees? Could the right hon. Lady

advise us on the appointment of the Select Committee on European Legislation, which has the specific function of scrutinising directives and regulations that emerge from Europe? That subject doubtless exercises Conservative Members, but it must exercise Labour Members as well. The matter is particularly important in relation to the common fisheries policy and the common agricultural policy; the common fisheries policy was a major issue during the general election campaign. The Prime Minister refused to sign the pledge committing his party to abolishing quota hopping. What priority will the Government place on the common fisheries policy in the run-up to, and during, the intergovernmental conference?

Mrs. Taylor: The hon. Lady will know that my right hon. Friends have made it clear, and I have repeated today from the Dispatch Box, that fisheries policy is one of our major concerns. I have said that we intend to play a positive role in negotiating improvements to the common fisheries policy, and we stand by that. I acknowledge what she says about the need for the early establishment of a wide range of Committees. We do not want to deny the opportunity for scrutiny where it is required. I think that many hon. Members will be anxious to serve on the Committees and I hope that we can establish them as quickly as possible.

Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): The Government are of course entitled to change policy on GCHQ if that is their wish and if the change is contained in their manifesto. I am sure that it was a slip of the tongue, but the Leader of the House seemed to imply, in reply to an earlier question, that because the matter was contained in the Labour party's manifesto, there was no need for a statement on it. It would be a dangerous precedent to set if we were not to be entitled to debate matters or have a statement on them simply because they were in a party manifesto. I am sure that the right hon. Lady would want to correct that point.

Mrs. Taylor: The hon. Gentleman is gracious to say that we are entitled to change policy on GCHQ. Yes, we are—and we have. There is no need for a statement. The debate on the Queen's Speech is wide ranging, and if hon. Members want to raise the issue, they are entitled to do so.

Points of Order

3.37 pm

Mr. Tony Benn (Chesterfield): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. Having had the opportunity of reading your statement in the *Official Report*, I am submitting a memorandum to you on the possible desirability of referring the matter to the Standards and Privileges Committee and I should be grateful if you would consider it and perhaps make a statement at an appropriate moment.

Madam Speaker: I shall certainly look at it when it comes into my Office.

Sir Peter Emery (East Devon): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. I am sorry to say that I consider the answer from the Leader of the House to the question about Prime Minister's questions to be entirely inadequate. I shall raise the matter in an Adjournment debate at the earliest possible opportunity.

Mr. Archy Kirkwood (Roxburgh and Berwickshire): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. Following the exchanges in business questions this afternoon, I am greatly concerned that there appears to have been some tutoring of the official Opposition as to what question to ask the Leader of the House. The right hon. Member for North-West Cambridgeshire (Dr. Mawhinney) has clearly been handing round questions because Opposition Members obviously do not have the wit to think of any of their own. I have a serious question for you, Madam Speaker. If hon. Members ask questions of a repetitive nature, surely you have the authority to hold them to account and stop them from doing so. I hope that you will consider doing that in future.

Madam Speaker: The hon. Gentleman is quite correct. At times this afternoon, questions became tedious and repetitive, and I have a shrewd idea about what was going on. I am rather tolerant, and it was the first time that the Leader of the House had been at the Dispatch Box, so I thought I would give her a good innings, but I shall watch the matter in future.

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (North Essex): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. May I ask you to reflect on the manner in which hon. Members take the oath and the fact that, while we respect republican sentiments among Labour Members, it is possible that the manner in which hon. Members take the oath could bring the House into disrepute? May I ask you to make a statement on the subject?

Madam Speaker: I do not think that a statement is necessary. It may be some years before many hon. Members have to take the oath again, but when new Members come in at a by-election, I shall bear in mind what the hon. Member has said and what I know is the feeling of the House. I shall watch hon. Members very carefully on taking the oath, the hon. Gentleman can be assured of that.

BILL PRESENTED

REFERENDUMS (SCOTLAND AND WALES)

The Prime Minister, supported by Mr. Secretary Prescott, Mr. Secretary Dewar, Mr. Secretary Davies, Mr. Secretary Straw, Mrs. Ann Taylor and Mr. Henry McLeish, presented a Bill to make provision for the holding of a referendum in Scotland on the establishment and tax-varying powers of a Scottish Parliament and a referendum in Wales on the establishment of a Welsh Assembly; and for expenditure in preparation for the establishment of a Scottish Parliament or a Welsh Assembly: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed [Bill 1].

Orders of the Day

Debate on the Address

[SECOND DAY]

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on Question, [14 May]

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, as follows:—

Most Gracious Sovereign,

We, Your Majesty's most dutiful and loyal subjects, the Commons of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, in Parliament assembled, beg leave to offer our humble thanks to Your Majesty for the Gracious Speech which Your Majesty has addressed to both Houses of Parliament—*[Mr. Kaufman.]*

Question again proposed.

Work, Welfare, Education and Health

3.39 pm

The Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Mr. David Blunkett): Madam Speaker, in opening today's debate on the Queen's Speech, I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House on what I think you described as a very good innings indeed. I also wish to indicate that, in the spirit of the Jopling Committee recommendations, I shall keep my speech brief—not least so as to ensure that many of the new Members can make their maiden speeches today.

I have the privilege of being the first Labour Secretary of State for Education and Employment; the first Labour Secretary of State for the past 18 years to stand at this Dispatch Box; and the first shadow Secretary of State for Education since 1929 to make it to the Secretary of State's job. I owe that gem of information to Roy, now Lord, Hattersley and I pay tribute this afternoon to a lifetime's commitment to the education service and to the love of his life.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): That was in *The Guardian*.

Mr. Blunkett: My hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Mr. Skinner) says that it was in *The Guardian*. I had better check that, but I checked it with Lord Hattersley and it is bound to be true.

My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has placed a particular burden on my shoulders—not the burden of delivering some of the most essential and key pledges of the new Labour Government, but rather that, in a pre-election party political broadcast, my right hon. Friend warned all of the nation's children that I was about to inflict on them a great deal more homework. Children have been coming up to me ever since asking whether that was a threat and what the extent of the homework would be.

I do not mind being the bogeyman on the Government Benches, as long as I do not have to come across in the night the bogeymen of the Opposition—not least the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard). I do not know whether the right hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr. Lilley) counts himself as a bogeyman—he was certainly wise enough to

move from St. Albans. I do not know whether he is here this afternoon, but I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for St. Albans (Mr. Pollard) on achieving that tremendous victory. This is the first time I can remember that anybody standing for the leadership of a political party has appealed to his supporters to stop campaigning for him, on the ground that what they have said about opponents might be embarrassing. That shows the measure of the disarray on the Opposition Benches.

At last, we have the opportunity of turning words into action and of starting the process of making a difference to the lives of millions of people across this country. We are able to offer a new beginning—a partnership and a consensus within the British nation so that the crusade for standards, the drive for opportunity in work and the chance to be able to earn their own living will at last be a reality for so many people who have waited these long 18 years for a change of Government.

We have a chance to give young and old alike some hope for the future. We have the opportunity to offer young people the sort of standards that others have taken for granted. We have the ability to give young and old alike the chance to work when, for so long, they have been dependent on others—to translate dependency into independence and to translate welfare into work. *[Interruption.]* The grumblings of Opposition Members should be mirrored by the reality of the tripling of the number of people over the past 18 years who were made dependent on state benefits—that is a tribute not to independence but to extending the tentacles of the state in a way that Margaret Thatcher could not, presumably, have envisaged when she made her speech on the steps of Downing street in May 1979.

This time, the pledges are clear; we will deliver on them over the next five years and rebuild trust in politics and democracy and the ability of the Government to work with the people in delivering those pledges.

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (North Essex): Which of the right hon. Gentleman's ministerial colleagues would he congratulate on the latest fall in the unemployment figures?

Mr. Blunkett: I would give considerable credit to many of my right hon. and hon. Friends for bringing about a new state of unemployment among former colleagues of Opposition Members—that is the only level of unemployment that we are prepared to tolerate over the next five years.

I am proud of the Government's education and employment team and, working with the people, we will do the job—but the Government do not believe that we can do it alone. We shall be working with those in education—parents, governors, teachers and heads—and with those in the Employment Service, in our jobcentres and in the community who have long awaited an enabling Government who will provide the resources of the state to enable people to determine their own lives and to be given the opportunity and the wherewithal to flourish in a complicated world of new technology and a knowledge-based society in which human capital has replaced the 19th-century investment of fixed capital.

Above all, we shall give the many what has so often been available only to the few. We shall spread the benefits of smaller class sizes to those who, over the past

18 years, have suffered the indignity and difficulty of larger class sizes, thus extending the benefit of lifelong learning to the many.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman) spelt out the situation clearly in his elegant and witty speech yesterday. He spoke of three private schools in his constituency and how £2.25 million of state money benefits the privileged few, whereas 14,000 children in his constituency were facing larger class sizes and underfunding. Translating the resources that we have at our disposal into priorities that enable the many to succeed will be a key task for me, my Front-Bench team and the whole Government.

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot): Is it not true that the money available in the first year from the abolition of assisted places will amount to something like £49 million? The Government cannot deliver on their undertaking. Are they not in fact promoting a deceit on the British people by saying that class sizes will be reduced but without specifying where the money will come from? The abolition of assisted places will not provide it.

Mr. Blunkett: I am very happy to enlighten the hon. Gentleman, as I was during the general election campaign. I was delighted that the British people believed a party of honesty rather than a party of gross dishonesty.

By the year 2000, £100 million will have been freed from the assisted places scheme, partly because some youngsters will come off the scheme as they leave school and partly because new money will not be applied to the scheme from next year but will instead be used to aid pupils in state schools.

Perhaps I can remind the hon. Gentleman of the legacy of the previous Government. Over the past 15 years, there has been a 40 per cent. increase in the number of children in primary education taught in classes of more than 30. How an Opposition Member can raise the issue of class sizes with me, a representative of the new Government, I really do not know. The increase in class sizes and the legacy of neglect will take us years to overcome, but we have been honest; we did not pretend to the electorate that we could do everything in 12 or 18 months. We set out a programme for a five-year Parliament which, the electorate and our success willing, we shall turn into a second and third Labour term to build on the foundations that we are laying so that we can rebuild the trust of the British electorate.

A reduction in class sizes is just one of our pledges, but I shall spell out in greater detail this afternoon and in the weeks to come the way in which we shall implement our key commitments to ensure that every child has the opportunity to succeed.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): I join others in wishing the right hon. Gentleman and his colleagues well, in the hope that they succeed in what they have set out to do.

Has the Secretary of State yet had time to ponder the rather peculiar fact that some of the local education authorities that deliver the best results in their schools have the largest class sizes; whereas many of the LEAs—mostly controlled by Labour—that produce the worst results have the smallest classes?

Mr. Blunkett: Until 1 May, of course, the Conservative party controlled only five councils. It now

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controls the county of Kent, with seven of the worst schools in Britain. I shall be interested to see what dramatic action Kent county council, under the Conservatives, will now take to deal with the five LEA schools and two grant-maintained schools that have worse results than The Ridings school had when the right hon. Gentleman's regime—he was a Minister in it—took action against The Ridings and Calderdale council. We shall see what happens in the weeks and months ahead.

Whenever action is not taken, whatever the complexion of the local authority, we shall act to ensure that the children in question are not denied a decent education. I just wish that the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) had acted decisively when, as a Minister, he had the chance to do so.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr. Blunkett: I give way to the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes).

Mrs. Margaret Ewing (Moray): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. I hesitate to raise it during the speech of the Secretary of State, for whom I have the highest regard, but it relates to the business of the House.

As you know, Madam Speaker, the Referendums (Scotland and Wales) Bill was to be published today; it is of great interest to Scottish and Welsh Members. It appears that the Bill was circulating among members of the Welsh press by 12 noon today, yet when I made representations at the Vote Office 10 minutes ago it was not readily available to Members. Does not that show contempt for the rights of hon. Members?

Madam Speaker: I shall of course have the matter looked at right away. The House is grateful to the hon. Lady for raising it.

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): Will the Secretary of State consider one other method of improving equality of access, consistent with what he has said about the abolition of assisted places? There are many good schools, but it is often difficult to get into them. They all have to be applied for separately. Schools in metropolitan areas, for instance, would certainly benefit from a co-ordinated application system at primary and secondary level rather like the system operating for universities and colleges.

Will the Secretary of State review that matter, including the Greenwich judgment, so that access to schools and quality of teaching can be approached by the Government with a fresh mind, with a view to dealing with some of the injustices and frustrations caused by the current system?

Mr. Blunkett: For the avoidance of misunderstanding: I believe it unlikely that there will be a change in the Greenwich judgment. The system of children crossing local authority boundaries has become established as part of parental preference, but I can undertake to review the admissions system and the co-ordination that is required. Proposals will be made in the White Paper and consultation will take place on it, so that we can make some sense of what, in certain parts of the country—Bromley,

Hertfordshire and elsewhere—is currently nonsensical. We should be very happy to hear from the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues any suggestions that they may have. We would be prepared to listen to them and to consider them.

I was going to give way next to my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds, South—

Mr. John Gunnell (Morley and Rothwell): I congratulate my right hon. Friend—but I must tell him that I am no longer the Member for Leeds, South. I have been translated to Morley and Rothwell, which does include parts of Leeds, South.

The former Minister, the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth), used to make it clear in Committee and in the House that the Government rejected the idea that class size bears any relation to performance. Does my right hon. Friend's experience bear out mine? When I met parents outside schools during the campaign I found that nothing was more important to them than our promises on class size. They knew very well that their children were losing out because they were in classes of more than 30. We shall need time to put that right, but the electorate found our commitment on the issue very important.

Mr. Blunkett: I am grateful for that comment. Perhaps my hon. Friend will forgive me for getting the name of his constituency wrong. I am struggling with 200 or so new voices to get used to as well, so we may have a little difficulty on that front for a month or two.

My hon. Friend is right to point out that the issue of class sizes is raised in every school that we visit. Everyone, including those involved in private education, acknowledges that class size matters for delivering the basics. We shall face and overcome the Conservative Government's legacy of 45 per cent. of our youngsters aged 11 being unable to deal with maths adequately and more than 40 per cent. of them not being able to deal with reading and writing at an adequate level. It is crucial that we set targets and work with teachers on methodology. We must have class sizes that make it possible for us to deliver to those young children so that we can do the job satisfactorily.

Mrs. Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham): May I add my congratulations to the right hon. Gentleman? I hope that he achieves everything that he has set out in his manifesto. Will he confirm that only a few weeks before the general election he allowed the new assisted places to go ahead from 1 September? Will he also confirm that those places will go ahead from that date and tell us how long they will last? Presumably they will last for at least the next six years.

Mr. Blunkett: I am delighted to say that Cheltenham Ladies' college is now in a Labour constituency—or was it Roedean that the hon. Lady attended?

Mrs. Gillan: Cheltenham Ladies' college.

Mr. Blunkett: That is actually in a Liberal Democrat constituency.

I am delighted to take questions from the former Ministers at the Department for Education and Employment. It is like déjà vu, only the other way round.

I am also delighted to confirm that, on this occasion, the hon. Lady is correct. During the general election campaign, I said that children who have been allocated places will be permitted to take them up. We shall legislate within weeks to ensure that schools do not abuse the licence that was given to them to look after the interests of children by agreeing to places for 1998 or 1999 onwards. The hallmark of this Government will be to put children before dogma. It will be to ensure that the interests of our children come first on every occasion. Our ambition is to ensure that the programme that we are delivering and the targets that we are setting work with the profession to do the job.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman. I add my words of welcome and wish him success in his important task. He talks about dogma. Does he realise that most damage has been inflicted on education in this country over the past 20 or 30 years by the imposition of socialist dogma by local education authorities?

Mr. Blunkett: After six and a half weeks of trailing round the country, I had hoped that we had finished with all that. I should like a new beginning from this afternoon, getting rid of the tired rhetoric of the past and instead giving people a sense of purpose and some hope and belief that not only the Government but Parliament might address the real issues that face our country: young people without jobs; the long-term unemployed who want hope; lifelong learning to equip our nation with the tools that it needs to succeed in a new century. Instead, we get the same old questions and the same old dry, doctrinaire dogma from the Conservatives. They have switched seats, but they have not switched the jargon or rhetoric one iota.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Blunkett: No, I am going to make some progress in the spirit that I indicated at the beginning of my speech—setting targets and establishing some momentum for that change. We have already established the standards and effectiveness unit in the Department for Education and Employment under Professor Michael Barber. We have already established a new relationship with schools and colleges. We have already changed the style as well as the substance of the Department's approach.

We have talked to staff in London and we will be talking to staff in Sheffield, in Runcorn and in Darlington as quickly as possible. I was due to be in Sheffield doing just that now, but this afternoon's debate was arranged.

We will ensure that, through the White Paper and the legislation we will introduce, there will be a new beginning. There will be a general teaching council, the establishment of advanced skill teacher posts, and a new relationship and a new job description for local education authorities. Parents will work with schools, and schools will work with authorities. We are a Government determined to use the tools available to us to encourage, to support, and to bring pressure and support together to do the job.

I recall and pay tribute to Laurie Lee, who died yesterday. I knew Laurie Lee and I had the privilege of undertaking a Radio 4 programme about Laurie Lee and

the village of Slad. I interviewed him in his home and in The Woolpack. I had the privilege of talking to him about one of my favourite books, "Cider with Rosie". I also talked to him about the golden nails he described when he talked about knocking in the knowledge and information necessary to give children the tools to be able to read, to write, to spell and to do tables—those little golden nails that make the difference to children's lives. The Laurie Lees of this world, who bring alive our literature and give children a love of learning and a love of reading, are the people whom we should hold in high esteem. We should remember them with affection and thank them for their contribution to making learning something which all of us can be proud of and enjoy throughout our lives.

By working with the professions—working with teachers and heads—we can do the job. I am proud to announce the first steps since the new Government took over. The Teacher Training Agency has put forward a new qualification for headship. Aspiring as well as existing heads will be fast-tracked to take on the new qualifications that will become mandatory under legislation. In time, all heads will have the leadership skills and management qualifications to enable them to do the job. They will not only receive academic qualifications, but gain experience from the new headship qualification. The course will ensure that best practice is established and spread from one school to another so that we can ensure that the crucial task of leadership is available in the 24,000 schools in our country, thereby giving every child a chance.

We will build on the work of governors throughout the country. There will be new parenting skills in school and there will be the opportunity for lifelong learning from the moment a child is born. That is the task we face. Over the next couple of weeks, I will make announcements about a new beginning for early years education, sweeping away the dogma and the market forces that the previous Government espoused.

Let us be clear. The agenda of the future is one of equality of opportunity, in terms of gender, race and disability. [HON. MEMBERS: "Clichés."] I do not think that there is anything clichéd about equality of opportunity for women, for ethnic minorities or for disabled people. I pay tribute to the Minister of State, Department of National Heritage, my right hon. Friend the Member for Coatbridge and Chryston (Mr. Clarke), who did such sterling work in opposition in terms of disability rights. With the Minister for Employment and Disability Rights, my hon. Friend the Member for Oxford, East (Mr. Smith), and the Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment, my hon. Friend the Member for Newport, East (Mr. Howarth), he will review the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. They will work with and meet groups representing disabled people to ensure that we carry that work forward in the years ahead.

So many of our young people who are out of work have special needs of one sort or another. So many of them are in difficulty. It is our task to ensure that, through the new deal, we can enhance the life chances of people who have particular needs or have been out of work for more than six months. We must ensure that their hope is restored and that the cynicism that results from exclusion and alienation from our communities is set aside by the investment of the new deal money from the privatised utilities to give those young people the chance of a life. We must give them the chance to earn, to build their own

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families and to establish their belief in themselves in the community and help them set aside the desperation that results from feeling that society has rejected them and that they have been spat out by the communities in which they were brought up.

We must provide hope for a new generation and qualifications that will offer a passport to lifelong learning for all, reducing the divide in our society and removing the stigma of exclusion. That is the task of the new Labour Government working with the people. The Government cannot do it alone. We must work with everyone who is prepared and willing to put our objectives and priorities into practice.

To deny Government responsibility is to remove our responsibility for ourselves. We have both rights and duties. We need a Government prepared to take responsibility and a nation willing to rise to the challenge of the future. That is what we are talking about in the Queen's Speech. It is what we shall be debating in the months and years ahead. I am proud and privileged to serve in the new Government and I commend to the House the task of implementing our vision for the 21st century.

4.6 pm

Mr. Peter Lilley (Hitchin and Harpenden): I begin by conveying the apologies of my right hon. Friend the Member for South-West Norfolk (Mrs. Shephard), the shadow Secretary of State for Education and Employment who, as she put it, is temporarily suffering from antibiotics. She will shortly be back in the House.

I convey my sincere congratulations to the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, the right hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside (Mr. Blunkett), on his appointment to the Cabinet. I am sure that he will fill his post with great distinction. I say that not as a mere formality: before the election, I was asked on a radio programme whom I most admired on the Labour Benches and I immediately mentioned his name. [Interruption.] I will not continue in that vein or he may think that I am soliciting his vote, but I wish him and his team well—and, indeed, the social security team who do not seem to be present in force today.

I wish the Government team well, despite our party differences, because their responsibilities are of crucial importance. Failure in education would blight the future of a generation and social security exists to help vulnerable people at times of greatest hardship. During my period of office at the Department of Social Security, I always sought to focus help on those who needed it most. If the Government fail, I know that disabled, sick, unemployed and elderly people will suffer most. In opposition, as in government, their interests will be our prime concern.

The Queen's Speech comes in the wake of a severe defeat for my party. There are crucial lessons that we have to learn from that defeat. I have discussed those issues elsewhere, and they are not the subject of today's debate, but one point is relevant. We have to have the humility to recognise an unpalatable truth about the verdict of the voters. It may even be unpalatable to Labour Members. It was the Conservative party that lost the election, not the Labour party that won it. It was a chastening rejection of a

divided Conservative party; it was certainly not a ringing endorsement of the Labour party. Labour Members know only too well that there was little enthusiasm for them on the doorsteps and they ended up with fewer votes than my right hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major) secured in 1992.

Our failings not only damaged us, but allowed Labour to be elected on a bogus prospectus. Labour was able to raise expectations of what it can deliver way beyond what it can afford if it is to honour our spending and tax plans, which it adopted wholesale. Labour appetites will not be satisfied on a healthy Conservative diet and our task in opposition is to expose the inconsistencies, the shortcomings, the damaging consequences of Labour's programme.

Nowhere is Labour more vulnerable than in its approach to education, work and welfare, which it has said is the centrepiece of its programme. I am rather disappointed that the Secretary of State for Social Security—my old sparring partner, whom I congratulate on her promotion—is not in her place. Education, work and welfare is apparently the centrepiece of Labour's programme, yet the whole edifice of Labour's education and welfare strategy is built on very flimsy foundations.

Labour's objectives are fine. It wants to boost spending on education and to finance it by reducing spending on unemployment benefit, and it wants to achieve that by getting people off welfare and into work. Conservatives agree with those objectives. Indeed, that is precisely what the previous Government did. We did boost spending on education, and did so because spending on benefits for unemployed people had been falling steadily for four years as we brought unemployment down. We accomplished that by implementing our policies of reducing burdens on business, increasing incentives and achieving sustainable economic growth. Yet Labour says that it can reduce unemployment further not by encouraging natural economic growth but by job subsidies and artificial make-work schemes.

Mr. Fabricant: Will my right hon. Friend congratulate the people of Lichfield and Burntwood, in whose area in April the unemployment rate was only 2.9 per cent?

Mr. Lilley: I certainly convey my congratulations to them and to people in many other constituencies where there is low unemployment—far lower than in countries that have adopted the policies that the Labour party wants to inflict on us.

There may be a social case for make-work schemes. It may be worth spending money on providing training and work experience for young unemployed people as we have done for 16 to 18-year-olds. It is, however, codswallop to say that such schemes can save money. Those schemes cost money. They cost far more than they ever save on benefits. I have studied similar schemes throughout the world and I can tell the Secretary of State for Education and Employment that there is not a single scheme that saves money.

Labour's schemes will generate no social security savings; there will be no additional money to invest in education. Labour said that when it came to office it would look at the official books. After 10 years in office, I know that the officials will be looking at Labour's books, and I can tell the House what advice Labour will be getting: its sums simply do not add up.

The reason why job subsidy schemes cost more than they save is obvious if one bothers to think about it. Most of the subsidy goes to people who would have got jobs anyway, so it is wasted. There is no way of stopping employers replacing existing employees with subsidised workers—more money wasted. Given that under Labour's plans the subsidy will last only six months, many people will find themselves back on the dole in pretty short order. What a cruel deception. If the Secretary of State has hopes of receiving extra money from the social security budget, he is in for a nasty shock, as are any teachers, parents and pupils who have put their faith in Labour's bogus claims.

Even though the Government's schemes will not save money, they are clearly right to believe that job subsidies might create some extra jobs. That is simple economics. The lower the cost of employing people, the more people will be employed. If the Government believe that, however, they must also accept that increasing the costs of employing people through the national minimum wage and European social costs will destroy jobs. Indeed, the deputy leader of the Labour party, before he was lobotomised by the Minister without Portfolio—or perhaps for every portfolio—admitted as much. He said:

"A minimum wage will cause a shake-out of jobs. Any fool knows that."

I do not know whom he had in mind. The jobs destroyed by new Labour's increases in employment costs will far outnumber any jobs created by its subsidies. The overall effect of the Government's policies will be the opposite of what they intend. Their programme is not one of welfare to work, but of work to welfare.

What is more, the Government's job subsidies will not last: they will end when the windfall tax revenues dry up, and they apply to only a few hundred thousand jobs anyway. The national minimum wage and the European social costs will be permanent increases in the costs of employment and will apply to millions of jobs. Labour proposes a temporary job creation scheme and a permanent job destruction policy: new Labour, new job losses.

Yesterday afternoon, while the new Prime Minister was delivering his old Opposition speech about 18 years of economic failures, our policies were delivering yet another fall in unemployment. A further 59,000 people came off the dole.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): I ask a simple question. Is there a link between youth unemployment—I am sorry, but I cannot continue.

Mr. Lilley: I will come back to the hon. Gentleman.

The welcome fall in unemployment today has brought the rate down to around 6 per cent. on the claimant count and 7.5 per cent. on the labour force survey. Either way, the rate is lower than in any other major country in Europe. Those are the very countries whose social policies are destroying jobs and those are the very policies that Labour wants to adopt here. The Labour party will give power to Brussels to impose those job-destroying policies on us, and we shall fight that tooth and nail.

In my previous role, I travelled on the continent and visited countries to study their employment policies. When I met business men on the continent they told me how much they envied the low social costs of their British competitors. They said that their ambition was to persuade

their Governments to reduce their social costs to Britain's level, but that if they could not achieve that, their second priority was to push Britain's social costs up to their level. They could not do that so long as we were outside the social chapter, but once we are inside they will.

Labour has long claimed that the unemployment figures are bogus. It asserted that 4 million people are unemployed and that the number has not fallen. When will the Government publish new unemployment figures? Will their new figures show that there are 4 million unemployed people? If so, will the Government pay all of them unemployment benefit? Will they count people on their new make-work schemes and their environmental task force as unemployed? Or are those ways to take people out of the published figures?

Mr. Campbell-Savours: I am sorry about my previous intervention. A slight medical difficulty arose. Is there a link between youth unemployment and crime, taking into account answers previously given to me by former Ministers at the Dispatch Box?

Mr. Lilley: Nobody can define the causes of crime, other than to say that crime is caused by criminals. It is sensible to leave fewer people with idle time, because the devil makes work for idle hands. That is why it has always been our objective to bring unemployment down, and we are proud of our success in doing so. We did it through real measures, but the Government propose bogus make-work measures. I want answers from the Government about whether they will use those measures to manipulate the unemployment figures. Will they count those on temporarily subsidised jobs, for example, as unemployed? Or will those people, too, be taken out of the published figure? Labour's claims, not the official figures, have been bogus.

The Prime Minister yesterday boasted of an unprecedented welfare shake-up. To listen to him, one might think that Labour had spent the past five years clamouring for reforms that we stolidly resisted. History is a little different: I introduced 12 Bills to focus help on people in need, to improve work incentives, to tackle fraud and to encourage better provision for old age. Almost every Bill that I introduced was opposed and criticised by Labour, and virtually all Labour's proposals involved spending more money. Yet at the end of all its years in opposition the only specific money-saving policy that Labour produced was to abolish child benefit for children staying on in school. Now even that policy proposal seems to have been airbrushed out of the Government's programme. A party that was so vacuous in opposition is unlikely to prove a bold reformer in government.

When I was Secretary of State for Social Security, nothing mattered more to me than securing the future of pensions in the United Kingdom for present and future generations of pensioners. The Pensions Act 1995, which I introduced, brought equality between men and women, secure funding of occupational pensions and greater choice of methods to provide for retirement. A few weeks ago I unveiled my proposals for basic pension plus. That offered the prospect of higher, secure, funded and guaranteed pensions for the next generation. The proposals were welcomed by virtually every newspaper and by informed commentators across the political spectrum. Even some Labour politicians were forced to recognise the merits of our proposals.

[Mr. Lilley]

How shameful it was, then, that Labour chose to scare pensioners on that issue; how disgraceful it was that Labour chose to attack that policy with a cheap smear. At the very beginning of the election campaign, at a meeting in a school with other candidates, I was asked by one of the sixth-formers whether politicians ever told lies. I could reassure them that in my personal experience I had never known anyone—including all those on the Opposition Benches against whom I had debated and with whom I had often disagreed on points of fact—who had knowingly told a falsehood. If I had to attend that school today and answer that question now, I would have to give a different answer.

It was the Prime Minister who led the way with that smear in every newspaper and on every broadcast—and that was from the man who said, "Trust me." None the less, according to *The Observer*, at least one Labour Member of Parliament felt uneasy about such unscrupulous scaremongering. The newspaper reported that

"a Labour candidate, probably to be made a Minister in a Labour Government, was canvassing an elderly lady who burst into tears out of fear that the Conservatives would abolish the state pension. . . . The candidate, who asked not to be identified, felt moved to explain the Government's Basic Pension Plus proposal, to reassure the old lady."

Thank heaven that at least one sinner repented.

Labour lost the 1992 election because it told voters that it would spend more money, so in 1997 new Labour pretended that it would not. New Labour spending plans, it promised, would be the same as Conservative spending plans. That promise was the foundation of its appeal to middle England, but Labour cannot honour that promise, and it knows that it cannot. For Labour cannot stay within our spending plans. To avoid extra spending, Labour does not need just to jettison its own policies, but needs to implement ours. Our reforms of the past five years will save £6 billion by the end of this Parliament, and they were introduced in the teeth of Labour opposition.

Some of our reforms have been announced, but are still in the pipeline. Our spending plans depend upon them. We planned, for example, to equalise benefits for new lone parents and married couples. The Labour Government have said that they want new lone parents to get more. That will mean spending £120 million more than we had planned to spend next year and an extra £500 million in the long run.

It is not only our lone parent changes that the Government have said that they will not implement. They also propose to block our changes to housing benefit and to social security administration. In all, that is an extra £1 billion a year that the Government will have to find, and they will have to find it from within the social security budget because they have said that they will live within that budget. If the Government want to give priority to benefits for lone parents, will they take that £1 billion from pensioners, from disabled people, from married couples or from childless single people? Who will it be? No doubt the Secretary of State for Health will tell us when he winds up the debate.

The overall picture is clear: new Labour's claim that it will get money from social security to spend on education is totally flawed. First, its make-work schemes would not

save money, but would cost money. Secondly, it has rejected £1 billion of savings measures that we have announced. Thirdly, it has no other plans to save money on social security. There cannot be extra money from social security for education.

The only remaining source of extra money for the education budget comes from the Government's commitment to abolish the assisted places scheme, but the pickings are not so rich there either. The children currently on the assisted places scheme will be an extra burden on the state system and in any case the scheme can only be phased out gradually, so Ministers will have a long wait before they can get their hands on what will be a paltry sum.

The real reason for Labour's decision to abolish the assisted places scheme has nothing to do with the money that it might save. It has everything to do with the unacceptable face of new Labour—hatred of the independent sector, class envy and a knee-jerk hostility to choice. Choice is something that new Labour does not like and does not understand. Its hostility to choice is the common thread tying together the education measures in the Queen's Speech—the imposition of local authority control on all state schools, the abolition of city technology colleges, the end of grant-maintained status and the end of nursery vouchers. The Government really do believe that the man in Whitehall and county hall knows best. The sheer bossiness of it all is quite extraordinary. Many parents up and down the country are striving to get the best possible education for their children, but they are going to find it much harder if Labour's Bills are passed. They should know that the Opposition will continue to fight on their behalf.

The Prime Minister chose to send his child to a grant-maintained school, of course, and the Secretary of State for Social Security sends hers to a selective school. Those are precisely the opportunities that they intend to take away from everyone else. Yet the Prime Minister had the extraordinary cheek to write in his manifesto:

"What I want for my own children, I want for yours".

The sheer hypocrisy is quite amazing. There is

"no truck with middle class left-wing parents who preach one thing and send their children to another school outside the area."

Those are not my words, but the words of the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, and we all know which parents he had in mind. It is one thing for their children, another for the rest. It is not just the hypocrisy, but the arrogance that is intolerable.

Mr. Blunkett: I had not intended to intervene, but I wanted to take the opportunity to welcome the new Deputy Speaker to his first sitting and to offer our congratulations to him. I also want to ask the shadow Secretary of State whether he thinks that wanting the best for all children can be described as hypocrisy.

Mr. Lilley: When what someone has decided is best for his child is what he refuses to others, I think that there is no other word but "hypocrisy" to describe that decision—although "arrogance" is perhaps the runner-up, given the way in which the Government have handled the issue.

That is the arrogance of which we have seen so much over the first few days of this Government. First, there was the Bank of England: without having warned the

voters, the Chancellor ceded interest rate policy to the Bank. He made what he described as one of the most fundamental changes in the way in which the country is governed without even bothering to make a statement to the House. Then came the issue of Prime Minister's questions. The Prime Minister now tells us that he will answer questions only once a week—and, as though that were not enough, he even wants to be told the questions in advance. That is another change that we now know to have been pushed through without any consultation or agreement with Madam Speaker.

The Government may be able to steamroller those changes through now. The other side has the votes, but we have the arguments. The numbers may be on the Government's side, but the facts are on ours. The Government may think that they can use their majority to push their measures through the House, but the hard facts will not be so easy for them to push aside. I shall spend the next five years ensuring that the British people learn the truth about new Labour—for when the British people know that truth, they will not give new Labour a second chance.

4.30 pm

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): I think that we have just heard a leadership bid. It is not for me to intervene in the internal affairs of the Conservative party, but I must say that I heard hon. Friends sitting behind me say that they hoped that the right hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr. Lilley) would win the election for the Leader of the Opposition. I do not wish, however, to declare any preferences.

Let me be the first Labour Member to congratulate you on your appointment, Mr. Deputy Speaker. This is a very different House of Commons from the one that I last addressed: it is almost impossible to believe how much the House has changed as a result of the electorate's decision on 1 May. Understandably, much attention has been paid to the increase in the number of female Members of Parliament—mainly, of course, on the Labour Benches. That is indeed progress, and I submit that further progress will be made when the number of female Members no longer attracts attention from any quarter. I hope that that day is not too far away.

I welcomed the mention in the Queen's Speech of prohibiting the private possession of handguns. Like a number of my hon. Friends, I argued in the previous Parliament that after Dunblane we should take drastic action on handguns. The previous Government went so far and no further, and I am pleased to learn that the House will have the opportunity to vote for a total ban on handguns. I take it that it will be a free vote, and I know which way my vote will go.

If I have any regret, it is that the House did not take the necessary action 10 years ago, following the tragedy at Hungerford. Indeed, in the previous Parliament I criticised the Government, but also criticised Opposition Members such as myself, who should perhaps have been more forthright in demanding the kind of action that was taken, at least in part, after the further and terrible tragedy at Dunblane, which we must never forget. I accept that we might not have succeeded after Hungerford, but nevertheless we should have been more forthright.

The ban on trade union membership at GCHQ—Government communications headquarters—has now been lifted. As some of my hon. Friends know, during

business questions I took the opportunity to welcome the lifting of that ban. If there was ever an illustration of the arbitrary way in which the previous Government acted, it was their decision to impose the ban, without any justification. I reiterate the fact that two years before the ban, after the Falklands war victory, the director-general of GCHQ praised those involved in intelligence gathering.

We should pay tribute to those who fought the ban year in, year out—people such as Mike Grindley, who must have wondered at times whether he would ever see victory and the lifting of the ban. Those people have a spirit of believing in and fighting for a principle. Mike Grindley was dismissed from GCHQ and refused the compensation because the principle was so important, in fact so sacred, to him that he would never give up the fight. Victory has come to him, and I should like him to be given an award for the fight that he so bravely and heroically put up for an important principle, which is certainly appreciated by the Government if not by the Opposition.

Mr. Fabricant: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that GCHQ has an important role in the nation's security? Does he advocate trade unions in the armed forces?

Mr. Winnick: As usual, the hon. Gentleman's intervention is totally irrelevant. When the time comes for a debate on the armed forces, we can express our views.

Mr. Fabricant: The hon. Gentleman does not know the answer.

Mr. Winnick: The hon. Gentleman has asked me a question; if he will be good enough to be quiet for a moment, I can give my response. I am speaking about GCHQ. If and when there is a debate on the armed forces, we shall deal with the matter to which the hon. Gentleman alluded.

I am pleased that the Queen's Speech makes it clear that, after 18 years of Tory rule, local authorities will once again be allowed to start building as well as carrying out essential improvements. I am sure that new Members will find in their constituency surgeries, as I find in mine, that most of the people who come do so because they want to be housed in the first place or because they live in a high-rise block, perhaps with two or more children, and are waiting to be rehoused in a house.

It is disgraceful that for 18 years local authorities have been denied the means of building rented accommodation. Most people want to buy, but those who are not in a position to do so have been punished by being made to wait so long to be rehoused. It is right that capital receipts should be used in a phased way, as we clearly described in the general election campaign, so that local authorities can once again undertake the work that they did under Governments of whichever party before 1979.

In 1978, the last full year of a Labour Government, more than 75,000 local authority dwellings and nearly 18,000 housing association dwellings were started in England. In 1996, only 500 local authority dwellings and nearly 22,000 housing association dwellings were started. I am not sure where the 500 were—certainly not in my borough, where no starts have been made since 1979. The 22,000 housing association dwellings in no way compensated for the number of local authority dwellings built previously. No wonder there is so much housing misery and hardship.

[Mr. Winnick]

In the late 1960s, when I was a Member of Parliament, and in the 1970s, when I was outside the House, I never saw the scenes of homelessness that are now so common. I do not drive home; I go to Charing Cross station, and people now are always lying down for the night there and all along the Strand, and many of us see homeless people in our constituencies. That is only one illustration of the current housing shortage and the misery that it causes. There are also the jobs involved in housing construction and in furniture and other related industries that go hand in hand with housing starts.

There has been much justified concern about poverty and near poverty over the past few years, which, of course, was not mentioned by the right hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden. Much of that poverty has been deliberate Government policy. I want inequality to be narrowed considerably in the next few years. Large-scale unemployment, low wages—often very low wages—short-time working, insecure employment and the abolition of the wages councils have all contributed to poverty and inequality. As we knew during the post-war years, there is no more effective way of ending poverty and near poverty than once again to give unemployed people the chance to earn their living.

Far too many people in the west midlands are paid very low wages. Some are even paid less than £2 an hour. It is almost impossible to believe, but that is not unknown in the west midlands. I am sure that it is true in other parts of the country. A national minimum wage is needed and justified. I listen carefully to the arguments against it, but I do not accept them. I found it nauseating in the previous Parliament that Conservative Members who were not content with their parliamentary salaries went out of their way—not illegitimately or in a way that would come under the Downey report—to take directorships and consultancies, but lectured us about how terrible a national minimum wage would be, because it would undermine the economy. I used to wonder how they would like to work for such disgraceful wages, when they were not content with their parliamentary salaries or last year's increase.

There are many changes and reforms that I would like. I do not know whether this is old Labour, new Labour or any other Labour, but I accept that those changes cannot come about overnight or in months. After 18 years, it will take time—more than one Parliament—to bring about many of those changes on a secure footing. In the days after the general election, people felt relieved. Perhaps that feeling was confined to me, although that would surprise me. I am talking not only about Labour activists. People came up to me in the street and at the surgery that I held soon after the election and told me how relieved they were at the change of Government.

Without wishing to exaggerate, I believe that in some respects it was a bit like the feeling in eastern Europe in 1989. For so long, there was a feeling in Britain that there would never be a change of Government. People felt the arrogance of those in power, the way in which time and again the Conservatives belittled any belief that there would be a change of Government. They gave the strong impression, and I do not believe that they have learned the lesson yet, that they were the masters and had every right to rule. Like the communists in eastern Europe, they

believed that they had the historical right to rule this country for ever and a day. The electorate decided otherwise.

The Prime Minister told the parliamentary Labour party at Church house last week that Labour Members should always remember that we are the servants of the electorate. I believe that we should always bear that in mind. We are indeed the servants of the electorate. We should at all times carry out our duties with modesty and humility, always recognising that in a democracy, it is the electorate who decide at the appropriate time who should be the Government of the day. I hope, and I have every reason to believe, that we shall never show, however long we remain in office, the arrogance of those who ruled the country for the past 18 years.

I believe that the House of Commons will win back respect, as it has to, because our reputation is not high for all sorts of reasons. Its reputation is nowhere near what we would like it to be. We shall win back the respect of the electorate to the extent that people will see that we are doing the job for which we were elected as Members of Parliament; that we are not in the pay of lobbyists and companies; and that we have not been elected to get second, third and fourth jobs. Our job is here, first and foremost. When people see that over a period, regardless of my party's fortunes in future general elections, it will do much for the House of Commons.

This is an exciting time in national politics. I am very pleased that I have lived to see such a total transformation. It has been 27 years almost to the day since I last spoke from the Government Benches. I was out of the House for several years. When I came back in 1979, I was of course on the Opposition Benches. There has been a total change. At last, our people have decided that they want a very different sort of Government and a very different approach to politics. There is so much to be done, such as the improvements that I mentioned in jobs, in housing, in the national health service and in dealing with criminality. There may be changes in the welfare state. Nothing is set in concrete, but I am here to defend the welfare state, as I am sure are all my colleagues.

First and foremost in the welfare state is the national health service, which was brought into being by a Labour Government and which it is our task to defend and improve at every opportunity. If we carry out our task as we have said that we shall, and as the Prime Minister has said that we should, I believe that this Government will be re-elected in five years' time. I doubt whether there will be a general election before then. When people see the result of five years of this Government, they will conclude that we should be re-elected, even more so bearing in mind what happened over the past 18 years.

4.46 pm

Mr. James Clappison (Hertsmere): It is a great pleasure to address the House on this subject. This is my first opportunity to speak from the Back Benches on constituency matters for several years.

I was interested in the contribution of the hon. Member for Walsall, North (Mr. Winnick). I may have been one of the people he was getting at when he mentioned the arrogance of former Ministers. I do not feel like a fleeing communist dictator. I have not taken to a helicopter to escape the wrath of the people. I have simply moved from one side of the House to the other and listened to what

the electorate had to say to me. Labour Members should remember that all hon. Members are elected by the electorate and held to account by them. None of us should grow too confident or arrogant. All Ministers and the Prime Minister should remember that they, too, can be held to account by the electorate in due course.

I am pleased to be able to speak on a subject of great importance to my constituents, who will be interested in the contents of the Queen's Speech, especially as regards education. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside (Mr. Blunkett) on his appointment as Secretary of State for Education and Employment. I recognise and appreciate that he has a deep and sincere interest in education, and especially in improving standards for those in less privileged areas such as the inner cities. I recognise, too, that in framing the legislation in the Queen's Speech, he comes to the House with a mandate for the changes that he is seeking to make.

Perhaps the centrepiece of the right hon. Gentleman's legislative programme is phasing out the assisted places scheme. I regret that change, but I must frankly recognise that the right hon. Gentleman has a mandate from the electorate for it. That is regrettable, because more than 400 children in my constituency receive a high standard of education at independent schools through the assisted places scheme. The right hon. Gentleman, perhaps in an ungarded moment, referred to them as the privileged few. They may be privileged in the sense that their parents choose to give them a good education, but they are privileged in no other sense.

The common denominator among those children is that their parents do not have much money. Many receive completely free places because their parents' combined incomes are less than £10,000; the remainder of the parents have combined incomes of between £10,000 and £26,000. I would not describe those people as privileged and I doubt whether the right hon. Gentleman, on reflection, would do so either. They are low-income families receiving a good opportunity.

That does not mean that those children would not have had good opportunities at other schools in my constituency, because Hertsmere is proud of offering high standards in all its state sector secondary schools. Five of the seven secondary schools happen to be grant-maintained. They have achieved many distinctions; one received a special commendation from the schools inspectorate, while others have received national recognition in other ways. However, children on the assisted places scheme have an opportunity to receive education at schools of not just national but international excellence, including Haberdashers' Aske's school. Those schools are much coveted by parents in my constituency as a destination for their children to receive the education of their choice.

I recognise the fact that the Secretary of State for Education and Employment has, through the election, received a mandate for phasing out the assisted places scheme. I welcome what he said in his speech today about the scheme's future. Despite his mandate, we want to ask a number of questions on behalf of parents whose children are on the scheme and who are concerned about its future. I take what the right hon. Gentleman said today as an assurance that children now on the scheme will continue to receive education at those schools throughout their school life. The right hon. Gentleman gave that assurance

in response to a question, and I look to him now to deny it, if it is not the case. That is how I interpreted his response, and I welcome it.

Parents have many other concerns, including about the priority given to the brothers and sisters of those at present on the scheme. As the right hon. Gentleman knows, in other forms of education, brothers and sisters have priority in admission. He will have to address that issue in due course.

The Government's mandate is interesting, because the Labour party manifesto made a commitment to phase out the assisted places scheme and to use the savings to reduce class sizes for five, six and seven-year-olds. That is the basis on which the Labour party put that pledge to the electorate. Many people feel that the objective of reducing class sizes is desirable in itself. Why the assisted places scheme should be sacrificed in order to achieve that is not entirely clear. Unfortunately for the Secretary of State, the manifesto quotes the cost of the scheme as £180 million a year, but the savings made from phasing out the scheme are different from the cost of the scheme, because they must take into account the cost of educating in the state sector those who would have been on the assisted places scheme.

Mr. Blunkett: I should not like the hon. Gentleman or any other hon. Member to pursue a red herring. The money that the assisted places scheme will yield over the coming years is greater than the amount now being spent on the scheme, because the previous Government, in their public expenditure prediction totals, intended to expand dramatically the assisted places scheme. Indeed, they intended to double it.

We shall not expand the scheme, but we shall reuse the resources. I remind the hon. Gentleman of the words of the Chancellor of the Exchequer. He said that he was not committing new money to the 110,000 youngsters who had entered school in the past two years, on the ground that the marginal cost was so small that they could be absorbed at no extra cost.

Mr. Clappison: I am glad that the right hon. Gentleman has raised that matter because, as he will know, independent analysis has been carried out on that basis—the full cost of the assisted places scheme. Before he tries to discredit the source of that analysis, I should say that it comes from the Institute of Public Finance and has been supplied to me by the House of Commons Library. The Institute of Public Finance estimates that the saving from phasing out the assisted places scheme will fall well short of the figure that the right hon. Gentleman mentioned, because it has taken into account the cost of providing smaller class sizes for five, six and seven-year-olds and set that against the net saving. It estimates that the saving from phasing out the scheme all at once will be £49 million, which is the figure that my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth) put to the right hon. Gentleman. However, my hon. Friend was being rather generous—that is the amount that would be saved if the scheme were phased out all at once.

The Secretary of State has just made the commitment that the scheme will be phased out over a number of years, with children at present receiving education under the scheme being allowed to continue to do so. The net savings in the first year, according to the Institute of

[Mr. Clappison]

Public Finance, will be no more than £13 million. Over the full period of the phasing out of the scheme, it estimates that there will be a £250 million black hole between what will be saved from phasing out the scheme and what is needed to reduce class sizes, in terms of both new teachers and capital expenditure.

The Secretary of State and I will no doubt debate that matter on many occasions in the future, and I shall be interested to see the costings that he makes. What is his view of the net savings to be made and the cost of alternative education for children now on the assisted places scheme, and how does he arrive at his calculation? According to the Institute of Public Finance, there will simply not be enough money to pay for reducing the class sizes of five, six and seven-year-olds. The £180 million mentioned in the manifesto was the cost, not the savings, and the matter was put to the electorate on that basis. Those matters will have to be pursued, and the Secretary of State will have to say a little more about them.

Grant-maintained schools are also of great interest to my constituents. Five of the seven secondary schools in my constituency are grant-maintained. In each case, a substantial majority of parents voted for grant-maintained status; they want to know the Government's plans for the future of those schools. Given that the schools have made considerable progress as grant-maintained schools, they want to know why the Government are considering changing the structure. One of the points made in the right hon. Gentleman's manifesto, to which I shall return in a moment, was that there should be a greater concentration on standards rather than on structure. That being the case, parents of children at such schools in my constituency will want to know why the Government want to make any changes at all.

We are all concerned about the important subject of standards in schools. I appreciate the right hon. Gentleman's serious, sincere concern about it. We shall take a constructive approach towards that matter. We shall want to look constructively and critically—

Mr. Don Foster (Bath): Who is we?

Mr. Clappison: I hope that concern about standards is shared throughout the House. We want to look constructively and critically at the Labour party's proposals. We shall look at them on the basis of whether those changes are well thought out in detail and are designed to help to improve standards, or whether they are gimmicks.

Last year, the right hon. Gentleman and his colleagues made various proposals about, for example, summer literacy camps. They also proposed changes to the amount of time spent on homework by children, which would involve a degree of prescription. The centrepiece of the Labour party's manifesto commitment on standards—the flagship proposal—which was designed to attack underachievement in urban areas, was a new scheme involving the Premier League. It proposed the creation of study support centres at Premier League grounds for the benefit of local children. We have not heard anything about that in the Queen's Speech, but it is something that we shall look at with great interest. We shall be extremely interested to hear about the future of that proposal,

because we are concerned with proposals that will deliver real improvements in standards, not with gimmicks and wheezes.

One of the features of new Labour's election campaign was its specific proposals to the electorate. I congratulate the party on the magnificence of its marketing and public relations campaign, because it set a high standard in the marketing of ideas and suggestions. In the remainder of this Parliament, we shall want to consider the Labour party's proposals in detail. We shall want to see not just gimmicks and photo opportunities, but the real merits of its proposals, which we can examine in detail. It simply will not be good enough to offer a photo opportunity, a wheeze and a gimmick in place of a well-thought-out idea. We will hold the Labour party to account not just on those specific proposals, but on its entire conduct of Government business.

The Labour party has come into government with what can be described only as a very good inheritance. We have sustained, steady economic growth. Yesterday, the unemployment rate fell to its lowest level in seven years and is on course to fall to its lowest level for 17 years. We have witnessed particularly large falls in the number of unemployed under-25s, especially those who have been unemployed for more than a year. The new Minister of State, the hon. Member for Oxford, East (Mr. Smith), generously described that fall as a bonus. Today, the inflation rate hit its target of 2.5 per cent. Those achievements represent an extremely good economic inheritance.

We in the Conservative party will hold the Labour party to account not just on the promises that it has made, and which we shall consider in great detail, but on all matters pertaining to government. There is no comparison between the inheritance of the Labour party in 1997 and the inheritance that we had in 1979, when the country was crippled by high inflation, economic stagnation, strikes and a terrible reputation.

Today the country is well placed. We want to see it succeed. We shall play our part as a constructive and critically aware Opposition in holding the Labour party to account in government.

5.3 pm

Mr. Christopher Leslie (Shipley): I am grateful for the opportunity to make my maiden speech today, not only as the youngest Member of the Parliament but as the first Labour Member for Shipley since Arthur Creech Jones was elected in 1935.

I am particularly delighted to represent Shipley, because I have always lived locally. I was brought up and attended school in Bingley, and I currently live in Saltaire. It is a fantastic constituency, and to describe it simply as Shipley obscures the diversity of the area. Shipley town is the largest settlement, but the Aire valley also encompasses Bingley town, which I have represented on the local council for three years, Baildon and other villages such as Denholme, Cullingworth, Harden and Wilsden, and Menston and Burley in the Wharfe valley.

As tradition holds, I should like to pay tribute briefly to my predecessor, Sir Marcus Fox, who was certainly a high-ranking parliamentarian as chairman of the 1922 Committee. Whatever else may be said, he served his party well and his influence in Government circles was reputedly significant. Today, I read the maiden speech of

my predecessor, which was made in January 1971—18 months before I was born. I am sorry that I missed it. He discussed the issue of transport, which is ironic because, 26 years later, it is still a central issue in the economic development and the environmental quality of the Aire valley and the Bradford district. Although the need for the construction of the Bingley relief road in my constituency has been recognised for many years, the previous Conservative Government could never quite complete the scheme. It is now awaiting its fate under the private finance initiative. I will press for its early completion.

The Gracious Speech contained many proposals which will be of direct benefit to my constituents. It is so refreshing to be able to praise the Government, having all my life known only of the harm and injustice inflicted by Conservative Administrations. I am determined to try my best to ensure that for the rest of my life the Government represent the many, not the few. In particular, I am delighted to hear that immediate action is being taken to create employment for young people, who increasingly leave school and university with no option of stable work or long-term careers. In fact it is a struggle for many young people even to get their foot in the door. Age discrimination can cut both ways, and unless young people can obtain sufficient work experience the quality of their academic ability and skills is almost useless.

Through the implementation of the windfall levy on the excessive profits of the privatised utilities such as Yorkshire Water, which has paid not one penny in corporation tax since its privatisation, young people of my generation will be given a helping hand into work. They will have the potential of six months' real employment—a move that will dramatically improve the longer-term job prospects of young people.

For too long, the plight of ordinary working middle-class people has been ignored by the uncaring laissez-faire attitude of the previous Government. The need for a catalyst to spur the job market to move in the right direction has at long last been recognised. I am proud to be playing my part in this historic Parliament, which will benefit so many people by channelling resources from those who have enough already to those who need them most of all.

The transfer of resources to more productive benefit is the theme of the Queen's Speech. By working to shift the enormous budget spent on welfare costs and to transform it into increased opportunities for work and wealth creation, the emphasis on long-term economic sustainability is clear. It makes good, plain common sense to see public resources used for investment and not for more short-term consumption.

Investing in education is the key to unlocking the great competitive and inventive capacity that used to be the hallmark of British industry. By pursuing investment in the health service and infrastructure of our country we can not only create work projects in the medium term but upgrade the living standards of all our people so that we enter the new millennium equipped for new challenges, with our heads held high.

I am pleased to see that the new Government are able actively to promote the proper balance between rights and responsibilities in employment. Giving small firms the statutory right to charge interest on the late payment of debts is a long-overdue initiative, which was welcomed with great acclaim in my constituency. Moreover,

the introduction of a national minimum wage will signify the Government's strong commitment to those who are in low-paid employment. That will help to create new jobs not only by boosting spending power but by helping employers to see that long-term profitability is achieved by upgrading production processes and new technology and not by pursuing a policy of short-term asset stripping, redundancies and lower wages.

When considering the direction of the economy over the long term, the role of new technology cannot be overstated. In an increasingly competitive global market, maintaining flexibility in the production process is achieved by the combination of a highly skilled work force and the capacity to adapt products at speed, retain high quality and meet new demand in new markets. Frequently, that essential adaptability of the production process is aided by new technology, either delivering information, improving design or making efficiencies in the production process. I am therefore extremely glad that the new Labour Government plan, among other things, a university for industry, to help to disseminate the latest technological and vocational training and advice to British firms.

When, in 1936, the last Labour Member of Parliament for Shipley made his maiden speech, he delivered a remarkably insightful account of the need for improved standards in the workplace. I am enormously proud and honoured to stand here today, continuing that fight for more and better-quality employment, and I shall try my best to deliver on the promises that I have made. I hope that I can live up to the trust in me shown by the people of my constituency. Above all, I am here to shout for the needs of Shipley and to use my position for the betterment of the ordinary working people and families I have the pleasure to represent.

5.10 pm

Mr. Don Foster (Bath): I am absolutely delighted to follow the hon. Member for Shipley (Mr. Leslie). It is perhaps somewhat appropriate that I do so as, when I entered the House five years ago, I came having defeated a former chairman of the Conservative party. The hon. Member for Shipley enters the House having defeated a former chairman of the 1922 Committee. The hon. Gentleman will be aware that Sir Marcus Fox will be a very hard act to follow. However, I think that other hon. Members will acknowledge that the quality of his speech and the confidence of his delivery show that the hon. Member for Shipley will be well up to the task.

I take this opportunity to welcome the hon. Member for Glasgow, Springburn (Mr. Martin) to his new post as Deputy Speaker. I am sure that we can look forward to your wise guidance on many occasions, Mr. Deputy Speaker. While on the subject of congratulations, before the new Secretary of State for Education and Employment sneaks out, I wish to give him my best wishes and congratulate him on his appointment. I also congratulate the Government's Front-Bench team on their appointment.

The Secretary of State knows only too well that he has a difficult task, but many of us believe that, like the hon. Member for Shipley, he is well up to the task. He and his Front-Bench team have made a remarkably rapid start in beginning to undo some of the damage that has been done over 18 years owing to misguided Conservative dogma and misguided Conservative rule.



[Mr. Don Foster]

I pay tribute to the new Secretary of State on the tone and substance of the letter that he recently sent to head teachers and governors in our schools. I particularly applaud his desire to

"work in genuine partnership . . . With everyone involved in the Education Service to bring about substantial improvements in standards, achievements and equality of opportunity for all."

We wish him well in achieving that desire. He would do well to listen to the hon. Member for Shipley, who referred specifically to the need for significant investment in education if we are to succeed. I say to the new Secretary of State that we cannot fix a leaking school roof with fine words, fill a child's schoolbag with letters to head teachers or surf the information super-highway on broken desks. Promises without price tags do not mean a thing; there is no bargain basement in education because, as we all know, good-quality education costs money.

Of course, we all welcome the Government's new commitment to lifetime learning; but, without an additional commitment to increase funding for education, it may take a lifetime to achieve that ambition. If the country is to succeed in the increasingly global market, we must invest in its most important resource and increase funding for the education and training of its people. However, judging by the Queen's Speech, it would appear that the new Government believe that increased funding for education is too high a price to pay for our children's future. We have been told—indeed the country has been warned—that for the next few years at least this Government intend to stick to the previous Government's spending targets.

I hope that the Secretary of State will intervene in my speech—or perhaps the winding-up speech will provide an answer. The previous Chancellor's Red Book on the Budget in November last year contains figures to which the new Government say they will stick. A table on page 124 shows that in the forthcoming financial year there will be less, not more, money for education. It would be helpful if the Secretary of State would confirm that those are the facts and it is his Government's intention to stick to those figures. It would be even more helpful if the Secretary of State would go a stage further. On many occasions, he has said that it is the Government's intention over time—we acknowledge that it will have to be over time—to increase the percentage of gross domestic product spent on education. Will the Secretary of State confirm that, if there is to be even a modest increase in the percentage of GDP from its current 4.7 per cent. to, let us say, 4.9 per cent., that will require an additional £6 billion a year to be spent on education? It would be helpful to know where the Secretary of State will find that additional money.

If standards are to rise, as the Secretary of State wants, extra funds are needed and they are needed now. Without the basic tools to do the job—books, equipment and decent classrooms in which to work—raising standards will be an uphill struggle for any teacher. The Secretary of State has said on a number of occasions that it is his intention to raise standards. He also said in an article in *The Independent on Sunday* on 23 February 1997 that he intends to

"lay down from the centre exactly how reading should be taught."

Let me raise a further note of caution with the Secretary of State, for whom I have enormous respect. He should remember that it is not politicians who will raise

standards, but the professionals. Politicians can give teachers the framework and the money to do the job, but they cannot take over that job from teachers and do it themselves. We should no more believe the Secretary of State's claim that he will raise standards in education than we should believe him if he offered us a cure for the common cold. There is more than a hint of danger that the Government seem to believe that they know best how teachers should organise their classes and even how teachers should teach. We believe that those are matters best left to the professionals.

Mr. Blunkett: I reciprocate the hon. Gentleman's words of kindness and, in answer to a number of questions from him I should like to suggest that, in the spirit of wishing to fulfil our agenda, the hon. Gentleman should come and have a cup of tea with me in the next few days so that we may share our views—

Mr. Stephen Dorrell (Charnwood): Call me David?

Mr. Blunkett: Yes, he can call me David.

One way we can stop the common cold from spreading—it is something about which I have a particular obsession—is not to sneeze over each other. In the spirit in which the hon. Gentleman delivered his words, I can say that we need a common cause and a consensus for raising standards and increasing our achievements. I shall work with all those who are prepared to do so.

Mr. Foster: I am most grateful to the Secretary of State for his offer of tea. I apologise to him publicly—I have already done so privately—for the large number of occasions on which I sat next to him during the election campaign, streaming with cold while he became extremely frightened that I would pass it on to him.

I shall accept the Secretary of State's offer to join him and his ministerial team for tea. I hope that he will extend his invitation, not only to me but to the whole of my education team, which has now been significantly enlarged. However, I should tell the Secretary of State, in a genuine spirit of co-operation, that although I shall be delighted to have many cups of tea with him in private, it is important that the public debate continues, so I shall continue to challenge him in public. I must say—in a gentle way, because we are all being kind to him—that I was disappointed that he followed the precedent of his predecessor as Secretary of State and, at very short notice, pulled out of a public debate with me on education on television yesterday. I hope that we can have private as well as public debates in future.

There is, as the new Secretary of State said, much common agreement between his party and mine. For example, we entirely agree on the urgent need to reduce class sizes and we support his pledge and commitment to reduce class sizes for children aged five, six and seven. We would wish him to go further and make that commitment for all primary school children, from the age of five all the way through to 11. We have made it clear how we believe that can be funded. The hon. Member for Hertsmere (Mr. Clappison), who is no longer in his place, was right to draw attention to his concerns, which I share, that the current proposal for funding the class size reduction—the phasing out of the assisted places scheme—might prove inadequate and that the sums might not add up.

The Secretary of State will not agree with me on that point, but even if he does not acknowledge my concerns, he should pay attention to his hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend (Mr. Griffiths), who is now Under-Secretary of State for Wales. He, too, appears to be somewhat concerned about the funding of that commitment. On 7 April, during the election campaign, he was quoted in *The Western Mail* talking about the class size commitment. He said:

"Some, if not all, of the money to fund this will come from the assisted places scheme and we will also be talking to Labour's education team in England if extra resources are needed."

He, at least, is not entirely convinced about the proposed method of funding.

Although we do not disagree with the proposal that some lottery money should be used for education, we worry that that might be the thin end of the wedge. We all recall that, under the Conservatives, schools became increasingly reliant on supermarket sales promotion gimmicks. It would be a sorry day if, in future, schools had to rely on the uncertain profits of gambling. When we talk of high-quality education for all, we do not want to rely on the lottery slogan "It could be you"—the slogan for every child must be "It will be you". A wiser Britain must not be a lottery. It must be a certainty.

Mr. Simon Hughes: Before my hon. Friend leaves what was obviously the end of a purple passage in his speech, I wish to put a question to him as the chair of the governors of a local primary school. Does he agree that the justification for funding classes of fewer than 30 for all primary school children is that there is no logic in having classes of fewer than 30 up to the age of seven and then suddenly having far less teacher attention per pupil, with no less likelihood of disruption, no less importance or difficulty in the exams and testing and no lesser mix of languages? The logic must be that pupils aged seven to 11 should receive the same level of attention as those aged less than seven.

Mr. Foster: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Of course, if one can have only one part of the package, it would be far better to have it in the earlier years; but, as my hon. Friend says, it would be better to go the whole hog and ensure that all primary school classes contain no more than 30 pupils.

We share with the new Government a commitment to home-school partnerships. However, I hope that the Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment, the hon. Member for Newport, East (Mr. Howarth), who is now in his place and whom I congratulate on his appointment, will bear in mind our real concern that if we introduce—as seems to be proposed—a requirement for parents to sign a home-school contract before their child has even entered school, that is like asking parties to come together and sign a pre-nuptial agreement before they have even met. It is the policies, the procedure and the working together between parents and school that are critical, not the signing of a contract. Surely such a contract cannot be signed before there has been an opportunity for both sides to work together.

We share with the new Government a passionate belief in the importance of getting young unemployed people off benefits and into work. For a long time, we too have advocated a benefits transfer scheme. However, we would

urge the Government to bear it in mind that it is vital that each part of the proposed package contains a training element. Training will be vital.

We cannot possibly support the proposed means of funding that programme—the proposed windfall tax. We believe that tax to be retrospective and unfair and one that will hit customers and consumers. It is certainly legally ambiguous and, as has already been pointed out today, it is a short-term tax and there is no Government commitment to long-term funding of these various schemes.

We will go even further than that. The one thing that we shall oppose even more vigorously is any element of compulsion within the Government's proposals. Not every job is suitable for everyone. I was told recently that the youth training service had required a colour-blind person to go on an electrician training course. I certainly hope that that person is not responsible for the wiring in my house. It would not be appropriate to compel Swampy to work as a road builder. We agree with the Churches, which said recently of a compulsory scheme that it

"would be seen as a scheme to teach the unemployed a lesson, rather than as a means of giving them real assistance. In effect the work is made compulsory for most of the unemployed and that of itself could transform it into a form of servitude."

Of course the social security budget must come down, but we will not achieve that by punishing the unemployed for the mistakes of Governments, past and present. We need a social security policy that makes it easier to get off benefits, not one like the present system, which traps people on benefits and ensures that they are worse off in work than out of it. Increased support for child care will certainly help; so, too, will a minimum wage—but only if it is set at a realistic level, with an element of flexibility and, we would argue, the possibility of regional variations.

If I have sounded somewhat critical of some of the proposed new measures, that is because, although we share many of the Government's aspirations, we believe that—at least in some respects—there are more effective means of achieving them. I should say that I thoroughly enjoyed yesterday because of an incident that occurred after the Queen had made the Gracious Speech. I travelled in a lift with the relatives of a new Labour Member of Parliament and, as we exited the lift, one of those relatives sidled up to me and said—out of earshot of the new Member of Parliament—"You're Don Foster, aren't you?" I admitted that I was and he asked, "Why don't you come and join the Labour party?" I asked why I should, to which he answered, "If you became one of us, you would ensure that we took on board your much more sensible education policies."

Notwithstanding our differences, there is much on which we can agree. We entirely support plans to drop nursery vouchers. However, we wish the Government would go further and introduce early-years education of high quality for three as well as four-year-olds. That would be the best way to start to tackle the problems of illiteracy and innumeracy. We support plans to establish a general teaching council. We are delighted that the Government are getting on with the specialist qualification for head teachers. We are also delighted that they intend—I am sure that they will—to raise morale throughout the teaching profession. We support their proposal to insist that schools set targets, but we must of course make sure that schools are given the support to enable them to reach those targets.

[Mr. Foster]

The Secretary of State and his team have got off to a good start. Where possible, we will support and work with them, but where we disagree, we will provide constructive opposition. The House will agree that the nation deserves the very best education system, and we, too, were given a mandate to ensure that it has just that. We shall do everything possible to ensure that the Government live up to their promises, and we shall constantly push them to go that little bit further and, in particular, to fill the huge funding hole in their policies.

5.30 pm

Mrs. Gisela Stuart (Birmingham, Edgbaston): I am delighted to see you in the Chair, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I congratulate you on being confirmed in your post yesterday.

Edgbaston has a long and, indeed, proud tradition of being represented by women. In 1953, Dame Edith Pitt became the first woman Member of Parliament for Edgbaston, a city that she described in her maiden speech as

"a city . . . with a great tradition of good local administration and social progress . . . of hard-working and warm-hearted men and women."—[*Official Report*, 3 November 1953; Vol. 520, c. 10.]

She was succeeded in 1966 by Dame Jill Knight, who served the constituency loyally and well for more than 30 years. I am sure that many hon. Members remember her with great fondness. After 43 years of being represented by a woman, the people of Edgbaston, Harborne, Quinton and Bartley Green decided that they wished to continue being represented by a woman, but there was just one change—for the first time ever, it was to be a Labour woman.

In her maiden speech in 1966, Dame Jill Knight described Edgbaston as having

"pleasant, spacious lines . . . judges' lodgings, some very beautiful botanical gardens, a silver sweep of reservoir, a famous hospital, an important university, many excellent schools, a high-powered chamber of commerce and a world-famous cricket ground."—[*Official Report*, 25 May 1966; Vol. 729, c. 507.]

All that still holds true. The four city wards of Edgbaston, Harborne, Quinton and Bartley Green make up this diverse constituency, which, like my predecessor, I am proud to represent.

I entered politics when I became aware of what was happening to our pensioners. For so many of our older people, the past 18 years have been hard—3.5 million pensioners are on income support. Even those who thought that they had provided for their retirement found that they had been let down because some occupational pension schemes did not use their surpluses for the benefit of their members. Also, some workers lost out when their companies were taken over or went bankrupt. Some personal pensions were missold, and thousands of policy holders are still awaiting compensation. There has also been steady erosion in the value of the basic state pension.

It is important to acknowledge that pensioners are not a homogenous group, and one group of pensioners has suffered more than others—women. Even today, only one woman in five is in receipt of a basic state pension in her own right. Women who spent their working life working hard, either in low-paid and part-time jobs or—this is even worse—caring for their families or dependants, were

not able to provide for their retirement. There were no occupational pension schemes for them. They had no way of paying into a personal pension scheme because their income was not high enough. Those who stayed at home fared worst. The system was simple: those who did not earn and did not pay tax could not pay into the system and take advantage of the various insurance policies and pension plans. In addition, married women thought that they were provided for in their old age through their husbands' pensions but, on divorce, they found themselves in dire straits.

Edgbaston has more than the national average of women over 55, so I am acutely aware of the problems that women face in retirement. My previous work in pension law also raised my awareness. Labour's plans for a stakeholder pension will return dignity and status to those who have worked all their life. They deserve a decent retirement and financial security with a proper pension.

The Government are committed to saving the basic state pension and to cutting VAT on heating, which will especially benefit those, like pensioners, on fixed incomes. They are committed to reducing national health service waiting lists and stopping the forced sale of care homes. I know that many of my constituents will benefit from these first steps taken by the Labour Government, but I remind hon. Members that we will all, sooner or later, be pensioners, and we will all find that the improvements will be relevant to us.

I shall do my level best to ensure that future generations of pensioners, and women in particular, will not be caught in a perpetual cycle of low wages during their working life and poverty in old age. As a newcomer to the House, I hope that my colleagues will support me.

5.35 pm

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): It is my pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Mrs. Stuart). I hope that she will enjoy representing a Birmingham constituency. I cannot say that I am exactly from the Birmingham area because we in Lichfield consider ourselves to be very different from those in Birmingham.

I am especially pleased that the hon. Lady has come to the House because, along with the hon. Member for Swansea, East (Mr. Anderson), I am making a play for the co-chairmanship of the all-party German committee. I was telling him that her arrival would give me an opportunity *mein Deutsch zu üben*, or to practise my German. Perhaps the hon. Member for Edgbaston and I can get together outside the Chamber to discuss in German matters of mutual interest to our constituents in the west midlands. The hon. Lady will find that while there is sometimes argument in the Chamber, hon. Members co-operate outside. That is not a bad thing. It is a shame that television viewers sometimes do not understand that we co-operate.

The speech made by the hon. Member for Edgbaston was in marked contrast to what we have heard from Labour Front Benchers, who have offered a strange combination of clichés and wish lists—which we also heard during the general election campaign—but when they were questioned by Conservative Members about how these wish lists were to be paid for, there was no answer, only evasion.

I welcome three particular measures announced in the Queen's Speech, and believe it is a shame that they were not introduced by a Conservative Government. The first is a freedom of information Bill. It is a great shame—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order. There is far too much conversation on the Government Benches.

Mr. Fabricant: Thank you for your protection, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

I am disappointed that the freedom of information Bill has been relegated to the second or third year of a Labour Administration and in the form of a White Paper—perhaps it will never appear at all. I come from the libertarian right of the Conservative party and, as a libertarian, I think that freedom of information, which has worked perfectly well in the United States, ought to be allowed to work in the United Kingdom. I should have liked such a Bill to have been introduced in tandem with a privacy Bill, but I note that neither the Labour nor the Liberal party has girded its loins and suggested such a possibility. A freedom of information Bill might bring some gentle pressure to bear on the media to concentrate on things that are worth investigating, as opposed to those things that are not worth investigating but which do sell newspapers.

I have consistently said in the House that I support a ban on tobacco advertising. It is quite fallacious to maintain, as some in the House do, that a Conservative Government would not introduce such a ban—indeed, it is nonsense. We did introduce such a ban—in the two Broadcasting Bills brought to the House by Conservative Administrations. Both Bills contained provisions banning tobacco advertising on radio and television. We did that because tobacco advertising works. It encourages young and old people to smoke, when it is known that smoking is bad for people's health. It is therefore intellectual nonsense to claim that a Government who thought it wrong to advertise tobacco on radio and television would not also think it wrong to advertise tobacco on posters and in newspapers. This, therefore, is the second item of Labour legislation that I welcome.

The third item refers more to an action than to legislation. I support the appointment as Minister of State of the hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field), who will serve in the Department of the Secretary of State for Social Security, whom I see now sitting below the Gangway. The hon. Gentleman used to have an office adjoining mine; on a number of occasions I was able to repair his television set for him. I hope that the Secretary of State for Social Security will support him as much as I do in what he is trying to achieve.

There are also many items in the Queen's Speech that I do not support. Indeed, I do not support most of it. A great deal of it concerns presentation, not substance. We have heard about the Blair project and about social inclusion. Who can argue against that? What we argue about is how it can be achieved in practice. At the moment, the Government seem to be concentrating on relations with the media. The Foreign Secretary spent an inordinate amount of money putting on a media promotion to explain the mission of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office—instead of sending our missions

overseas a document explaining that mission. An expensive video was put on in the Locarno room for the benefit of the media, not for our ambassadors and high commissioners overseas. Once again, the media seem to be the message.

I should like now to comment on some other aspects of the Queen's Speech. I am pleased that we can comment on them, after what we heard from the Leader of the House today. It would seem that anything that appeared in the Labour party manifesto is to be given to the nation, not the House, but by decree—

Mr. Dorrell:—supported by plebiscite.

Mr. Fabricant: My right hon. Friend is correct. Having the opportunity to debate anything is becoming a luxury rather than the right of all parliamentarians.

Education appears at the top of the Queen's Speech. Before the election, education, education, education was the mantra. It was said that it would be the primary concern of the Labour Government to invest in our children's future. No one could argue with that, either. It is of paramount importance to invest in the future of this nation. The question is: how will it be paid for?

We have heard about the abolition of the assisted places scheme. Some 38,000 children of poor parents, whose average income is £10,800, benefit from the scheme. Missing from the calculation is how children who benefit from the scheme will be funded in the state system, irrespective of whether the abolition will be staggered. Some schools in my constituency will be affected, including S Mary and S Anne in Abbots Bromley. As a result of the change, 38,000 students will flood into the state sector, where of course they will have to be paid for.

The average cost per pupil in the state system under standard spending assessments is a little more than the cost of an assisted place. I cannot therefore understand how extra money will be generated. I could understand it if those 38,000 students remained in the private sector—but they will not. They will go into the state-run education system, so no extra money will be available. During the election campaign—it was repeated today by the Secretary of State—we heard again and again the Labour promise that class sizes would be reduced by abolishing the assisted places scheme. The figures do not add up, as I am sure the Chancellor of the Exchequer will tell the Secretary of State for Education and Employment in due course.

The Chancellor has his own problems, of course, not least a £12 billion gap in his spending and income projections. It was calculated by the Treasury only a few weeks ago—by the same officials who serve the Chancellor today—that a £12 billion gap will have to be filled somehow. I trust the Labour Government not to increase income tax rates, because to do so would be too blatant a lie even for a Labour Government. They put up posters promising not to increase income tax rates, but already there have been certain tax increases.

The first tax increase—it will presumably be debated because it did not appear in the manifesto—is the tax on mobile telephones. Are they really a luxury? Many would argue that, for small businesses particularly, they are far from a luxury. They enable many small businesses to survive.

[Mr. Fabricant]

Labour Ministers may claim that the independence of the Bank of England was foreshadowed in the manifesto; others would argue that it was not. Various models have been offered as success stories of independent banks in other countries, yet the most truly successful independent bank, the Federal Reserve in the United States of America, owes its success to the directive issued to Alan Greenspan not just to keep inflation low—that may involve putting up interest rates—but to aim for full employment. The two do not necessarily go together.

At the moment, the Bank of England has been given only one directive: to keep inflation within the bounds set by the Chancellor. That formula will be bad for small businesses and, more to the point, bad for the future of the United Kingdom.

Large businesses that are major exporters will be affected as interest rates rise. I remember the Chancellor, when he was still shadow Chancellor, criticising the Government by saying that the pound's value was too high. In the same breath, he claimed that the public finances were weak. How one can have weak public finances yet a strong pound I do not know. The strength of the pound derives not just from interest rates but from confidence in a country's economy. Still, the Bank is now free to raise interest rates in order to curb inflation, as it sees fit, while having no regard to the future of small businesses. If the pound is driven up, small businesses and large exporters alike will be adversely affected.

We have still not been enlightened about the rate at which the national minimum wage will be set. I remember the Deputy Prime Minister, when still in opposition, discussing that in the House of Commons just a few months ago. When I intervened on him to ask about the effects of the national minimum wage on small businesses, he said, "Well, it works in America, doesn't it?" It works in America because the national minimum wage there is around £2 an hour. Is that to be the national minimum wage in the United Kingdom? If it is, many trade unions will regard it as an insult. If it is not—if the figure is £4 or £4.50 an hour—it will be an insult to people in work.

Only a few years ago, did not the Foreign Secretary, when he was shadow Secretary of State for Health, say that any sensible minimum wage would result in £500 million-worth of extra costs a year on the national health service? That will affect the health of the nation far more than any of the Labour party's plans—which are bad enough—to abolish fundholding and perhaps trusts.

I am also concerned about the use of the national lottery to fund health and education projects. The national lottery was introduced on the basis that the principle of additionality would not be broken. It was to be used to fund projects that are not funded by the taxpayer. However, when the Chancellor of the Exchequer walked into the Treasury he found that the estimate of a £12 billion gap in his finances was correct. The civil servants who made that projection are the same ones now telling him that the gap indeed exists, so the shortfall must be made up quickly. The national lottery is now to be used to fund health and education—services that should always be funded by the state. The Labour party may well have introduced

the national health service and the welfare state, but time and time again Conservative Governments have shown their worth as stewards of the welfare state.

I have already said that I support the freedom of information proposals. I am pleased that they might be introduced, although I am disappointed that they will appear in a White Paper rather than a Bill.

In the latter part of her speech, Her Majesty talked about the European Union—the completion of the single market and the adoption of the social chapter. The Prime Minister said before the election—and he has repeated it since—that he would not adopt any measure that would damage British business and employment prospects. He does not seem to understand—or does not choose to admit—that he cannot cherry-pick. Once he has signed the social chapter, all measures are decided by qualified majority voting. There is no veto. That means that if France and Germany want a point enforced in law, it will be enforced by a directive from Brussels. There will be no cherry-picking.

I believe that the Prime Minister has misled the nation by saying that we can cherry-pick. If he feels strongly about the measures, why will he not introduce them in the House? If further legislation were introduced in Brussels and he chooses to cherry-pick, the House can cherry-pick. With its large majority, the Labour party can decide whether it wants a particular measure and pass it in the House. By signing up to the social chapter, the right hon. Gentleman takes that power away from Westminster and gives it to Brussels. The Labour party will learn to regret that as unemployment rises.

I said in an intervention on my right hon. Friend the shadow Secretary of State for Social Security that unemployment fell to just 2.9 per cent. in Lichfield last month. I hope that it stays at the level. If it starts to climb, it will only be duplicating what is already happening in France, Germany, Spain and Italy. What is the common denominator in those countries? It is not that they are on continental Europe, but that they have signed up to the social chapter and to state intervention in all things. Although new Labour calls itself new Labour and has all the rhetoric of new Labour, I believe that it still does not understand that Governments cannot make work; private individuals, entrepreneurs, companies, the market and customers make work. Businesses will be damaged by the social chapter and the national minimum wage.

Mr. Winnick: The hon. Gentleman has attacked the idea of a national minimum wage. Will he give the House an idea of how much he earns—his parliamentary salary plus anything else? Does he not feel some responsibility to do so, when he wants to deny his fellow citizens and many of his constituents a decent minimum wage?

Mr. Fabricant: The hon. Member for Walsall, North (Mr. Winnick) is renowned in Walsall. If he would like to contact the Fees Office he can find out for himself what he earns. The public are not as ridiculous as the hon. Gentleman—

Mr. Winnick: Tell us.

Mr. Fabricant: The hon. Gentleman knows full well that the figure has been publicised many times and is in the public domain.

Mr. Winnick: How much?

Mr. Fabricant: The hon. Gentleman has never done a job in his life, unlike me—I have run a company. I know that the minimum wage will affect not just people who are on minimum wages—

Mr. Winnick: How much?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant) is addressing the House.

Mr. Fabricant: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The hon. Gentleman does not realise that a minimum wage will also affect differentials. Of course I want hospital porters in the national health service to earn more, but if they had a wage increase, even the hon. Gentleman should be able to realise that other employees in the NHS would want wage increases, too. It is all very well his grinning idiotically. He is not on the Front Bench and he does not have responsibility for these things. If anyone were stupid enough to put him on the Front Bench, and even more stupid and made him Secretary of State for Health, what would happen when he found that the Foreign Secretary's prediction was right and that the policy would cost the national health service an additional £500 million? Would he like to tell me where the money would come from?

Mr. Winnick: I would like the hon. Gentleman to answer the question that I put to him. The Fees Office will have no knowledge of his incomes from outside Parliament. He has attacked the concept of a national minimum wage. I am asking him to declare to the House how much he earns.

Mr. Fabricant: The hon. Gentleman asks an interesting question. I can tell him that I have virtually no income from outside Parliament. He might like to read the Register of Members' Interests. I was fortunate enough to run a corporation before I came to the House. I am proud to say that it did quite well. I am proud to say that I sold it and have no shares in it. I have some savings from selling that company. Apart from the odd fee from Sky, which amounts to about 50 quid, I think, I do not earn anything outside the House. I hope that the hon. Gentleman is reassured that I am a full-time Member of Parliament.

Mr. Winnick indicated dissent.

Mr. Fabricant: He is not reassured. Well, I cannot waste the time of the House.

Another of the Prime Minister's comments on Europe—it sounded sane at the time—was that there is no mutual exclusivity between our involvement with Europe and our association with the United States of America. That is naive in the extreme. There may be no mutual exclusivity at the moment between our membership of the European Union and our continued ties with the United States of America, particularly with regard to trade and commerce, but if the European Union

deepens—there is no guarantee that it will—and if the Prime Minister continues not to be the odd man out in Europe, signing up to all sorts of things that ought not to be signed up to because they will damage business and industry in this country, he may well find that there is mutual exclusivity.

I believe—I speak only for myself now—that it is almost old-fashioned to talk about association with Europe, with the United States or, indeed, with any bloc of countries. The World Trade Organisation is committed to bringing free trade to all developed countries, certainly by 2020; I think that it will happen a lot sooner. Whereas in the 1970s it made sense to go into partnership with countries that were geographically close, it does not make so much sense any more.

The revolution in containerised shipping has meant that the cost of exporting goods to Australia adds only about 0.25 per cent. to the finished price more than exporting to Germany or to Austria. Nowadays, shipping goods abroad is relatively cheap. Telephoning abroad, sending faxes abroad or e-mailing abroad are instantaneous. The world has become a very small place. I believe that there is mutual exclusivity between deeper involvement in the European Union and our relationship with the United States of America.

We should not forget that it is not just language that we share with the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand; we share a common legal system too, which is important in business. People do not realise that United Kingdom companies—not the Japanese—are the biggest shareholders in American corporations and that American corporations are the biggest shareholders in British companies. That has happened not just for historical reasons, but because we can do business together. We speak the same language in every sense of the word. We share the same legal system and that is something to be proud of.

The Labour party and the Labour Government will enjoy a honeymoon period for up to a year, or perhaps 18 months, but at the end of the day—that day may be sooner rather than later—they will have to translate all the wish lists into performance, and that means finding the money. It does not mean saying, "We are going to abolish the assisted places scheme simply for the sake of socialist dogma." It means finding the money not only to pay for reduced class sizes, but to pay for the 38,000 pupils currently in the private system who will be forced to enter the state system. The figures do not add up, and the Chancellor knows it.

Tax rises have already been announced. Heaven knows what will happen in the forthcoming Budget. There is a shortfall of £12 billion over the next two years, and Treasury civil servants say that it has to be made up. We shall begin to see how it will be made up over the next few months. God help the Labour party but, more important, God help this nation.

6.2 pm

Audrey Wise (Preston): I add my congratulations and pleasure, Mr. Deputy Speaker, at seeing you in the Chair.

It has been pleasant to sit through the debate and to hear two maiden speeches. I add my congratulations to my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Mr. Leslie). It is especially appropriate to hear from such a young Member of Parliament because for 18 years, we have had

[Audrey Wise]

a Government who have waged war on young people. My hon. Friend will have a great deal to do in helping the new Government to undo the effects of that disastrous policy.

It was very nice to hear the maiden speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Mrs. Stuart), one of the new women Labour Members. I know Edgbaston and its beautiful botanical gardens. Every time I visit it, it will give me additional pleasure to know that it is now represented by a Labour woman. The addition of so many women, of whom my hon. Friend is one, to the House will materially improve the style and content of our debates. She gave some indication of her future contribution.

I will concentrate my remarks on health. Before moving to the specific issues of the national health service, I point out that other health issues are covered in the Queen's Speech. The food safety agency is a health measure that I greatly welcome. The opportunity for people to have access to purer food, to know what they are eating and to have confidence in it is very much a matter of health. Housing is also a matter of health. Anything that can be done to improve housing, to reduce homelessness and to provide homes that are decent, warm and comfortable is a health measure, as is the reduction of poverty.

Conservative Members see the national minimum wage simply as a cost. I can tell them that the low-paid see it as a benefit, and it will be a benefit to their health. The more people can be lifted off starvation wages, the healthier the nation will be.

I warmly welcome the passage in the Queen's Speech that commits the new Government to

"improve the National Health Service, as a service providing care on the basis of need to the whole population."

I also particularly welcome the reference to building co-operation within the service because over the past few years, we have seen nothing but fragmentation. Competition can be useful in certain circumstances, but inappropriate competition in the national health service is entirely destructive. One of the things it destroys is rational decision making.

I draw on my experience of serving on the Health Select Committee, which I have had the honour to do for the past 10 years. The Health Select Committee, like all Select Committees, is an all-party Committee. The great merit of a Select Committee is that if it does its job properly, as our Committee has, it is driven by facts and by evidence. That is why, even with the inclusion of rather more Tory Members than will be the case in future, we produced excellent reports which received scant attention from the Conservative Government and from which they did not learn the proper lessons.

About three years ago, we produced a report on priority setting in the national health service, which is particularly interesting and useful in the context of a new Government pledged to eliminate the internal market. The Select Committee called for

"approaches to decision making that: are systematic; are transparent; take full account of the views of the public, health professionals and other interested parties; are based as far as possible on a firm assessment of need—taking full account of epidemiological data; and, where the information is available, make full use of effectiveness and cost effectiveness data."

There is no mention in that recommendation of any value in competition. The approach is far more strategic and coherent than the approach we have in the national health service at present with the internal market.

We also asked for, at national level,

"the comprehensive evaluation of all aspects of local purchasing and decision making."

When we abolish the internal market, we shall need to evaluate carefully everything that we put in its place. I believe strongly in the sensible concepts that the Select Committee identified.

Of course I want a properly resourced national health service. It is, however, possible for money to be spent well or to be spent badly. There are many instances in the national health service of money that could be spent in much better ways. For instance, more alternative complementary therapies could be provided. It has been established that chiropractic is a more effective and cost-effective way of treating back pain than conventional methods. Yet most people who require the services of a chiropractor have to pay for private treatment. Would it not be more sensible for GPs and others to enlist the services of a chiropractor through the national health service? In theory it can be done, but it does not happen very often. That will be one of our yardsticks.

We should also seek effective treatment. One of the Select Committee reports made the following rather plaintive request:

"We would urge that consideration is given to highlighting treatments and services which are known to be particularly effective—as well as those which are particularly ineffective."

That struck me as a modest ambition, yet we know that many treatments carried out in the NHS are not effective. I congratulate the previous Government on taking some steps towards encouraging research and a research-based health service, but the new Government will go much further.

Other parts of the NHS, such as maternity services, are extremely important to me and most of the population. Five years ago, the Health Committee produced a landmark report which continues to reverberate. It was such a powerful report that even the previous Government had to take some notice of it.

Many of the issues that the report raised still require attention. For example, we pay twice for some aspects of maternity provision. We pay GPs for examinations that are actually carried out by midwives. I am glad that the British Medical Association has given the health measures in the Queen's Speech a warm welcome. Although I am very much in favour of carrying professionals with us, I believe that GPs have quite enough to do. Payments are being duplicated in the national health service, and I recommend that we look into that matter.

There is evidence of empire building in the NHS through investments that appear glamorous but are not necessarily the most appropriate. For example, there is heavy investment in monitors, yet the best monitor of a pregnant woman is a midwife who has the time to devote to the mother and has followed her throughout her pregnancy. The Select Committee placed great stress on the importance of continuity of care and carer in the delivery of maternity care.

That is not about more money, but about money being spent differently and giving professionals such as midwives adequate grading, which they frequently do not

have. It is also about more rational staffing, and in maternity, that means "staffing the women", rather than "staffing the ward". There is a great deal of richness in the Select Committee's recommendations which involve changes of attitude and the consequential rearrangement of provision. I strongly support the Government in their desire to look at all those matters.

There have also been pilot schemes which would have come to an end had the previous Government continued in office, despite the fact that they have proved extremely valuable. One example is the establishment of midwifery partnerships. The new Government should consider midwifery partnerships as a rational way of delivering maternity care.

Twenty years ago, the then Labour Government instituted an inquiry into children's health, resulting in the Court report. Unfortunately, before it could be implemented, the Government changed and for 18 years we had a Government who gave scant priority to our children's health.

Mr. Fabricant: What?

Audrey Wise: Yes. For 18 years, the poor have got poorer and more children are living in poverty to the detriment of their health. There is more homelessness and more people live in rotten housing and suffer from respiratory problems. Little children are bearing the brunt of a Government whose priorities were entirely wrong.

The Select Committee report referred to the Court report which was produced 20 years ago. It stated:

"The Court Report contained over 200 recommendations, and though it is not possible to state in bald terms that the report was or was not 'implemented', . . . it is undeniably the case that some of the Court Report's major recommendations, for instance the proposal that comprehensive community children's nursing services should be provided, have not been implemented. The failure to make progress in providing an adequate number of trained children's nurses, despite recommendations not just by Court but in other official reports dating back to 1959, reinforces our view, which has gained in strength as our inquiry has progressed, that the special needs of children are given insufficient priority by policy-makers, health service professionals and others who in one way or another have a responsibility for children's well-being."

The neglect of children's needs in respect of health services extends to the entire House. I have quoted from the recent inquiry into children's health by the Select Committee. It was the first ever major parliamentary inquiry into children's health. That demonstrates the need for the 101 women who will be on our side and the need for an injection of human values and human priorities into the business of the House.

Mr. Simon Hughes: I respect the hon. Lady's knowledge and commitment to the subject. If she agrees with me that we need more children's nurses and more school nurses and generally more staff working in the health service, does she believe that it is possible to achieve that without a significant increase in net resources to the health service and, therefore, an increase in the NHS budget?

Audrey Wise: It is impossible for us to know what the NHS budget should be until we have examined some of the issues that I have mentioned. I have said clearly that I want a properly resourced national health service and

I stand by that, as my conduct in the House will demonstrate. However, it is too easy simply to say that we need more money spent. We could spend more money on the present wrong priorities and we still would not have a really good health service.

The United States Government spend a vast amount of their national income on so-called health care. A great deal is spent in the private sector, but about one third of it comes from the American public purse and they get extremely poor value from a huge amount of spending. So it is not just a matter of how much; it is also a matter of how well it is spent. For example, we need more children's nurses. Only one in 33 nurses have a children's nursing qualification yet more than one fifth of the population are children. That is clearly an inappropriate number, to say the least of it. Even worse, many of those one in 33 nurses with a children's qualification are employed not in children's nursing but in all sorts of other areas. That is nonsense.

We need a proper evaluation of how resources are spent and a determination to ensure that they are spent properly. Part of that process will come through giving people more chance of knowing how things are run. That is why I am proud to have been a member of the Select Committee that called for transparency and openness in decision making. That is the sort of thing that we need. Although I am very keen to see a transfer of resources to my particular priorities, I am perfectly sensible of the extra need to look very carefully at how money is spent.

Half the population is not served by a children's community nursing service. As adults, we know that we can be seen and helped by a district nurse if we are ill. For half the children in the country there is no equivalent to the children's nursing service. The new Government have an absolutely enormous task to remedy things that should have started being remedied after the Court report in 1977.

In evidence to the Select Committee, the previous Government said that everything was all right because if no children's nurse was available to go to somebody's home to nurse a sick child, a district nurse could do the job. That showed their lack of sense of the fact that children's health needs are different from those of adults.

Children are not simply miniature adults. We will not have a good NHS until that is recognised and children's needs are given proper priority. That change should be made and it should start in the House. All of us who have been Members of Parliament for some time ought to be ashamed of the fact that there was not an inquiry into children's health until last year. I am ashamed—but I am proud that I proposed one and that when it was carried out it produced four extremely useful reports.

We have to get our priorities right. I and Back Benchers in general, especially the 101 women who sit on the Government Benches, must ensure that we change the priorities of Government and of Parliament for the better. The task is very big, but many people are willing to help. One of the great things about hearing evidence—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Opposition Front Benchers are being far too noisy.

Audrey Wise: I am not particularly addressing Front Benchers. I am glad that there is quite a healthy attendance of my hon. Friends.

[Audrey Wise]

I believe that what I am saying will reverberate among the population. A new Government have been elected on the kind of things that I am saying—to change the country's priorities so that children, along with all those who are vulnerable, including the elderly, are properly treated and their needs are understood.

After a proper examination and a proper transfer of resources from empire building or inappropriate, inefficient and ineffective spending, we will be in a position to say how much extra we need. I am happy to go along with the Government's aspirations to ensure in the first instance value for money, knowing that we have made a commitment in the Queen's Speech, on which we were elected, to protect and improve the NHS. I believe that Labour will do everything that is required to honour that commitment. In five years' time, we will have the thanks of all those people for whom the NHS is a great Labour achievement and a great priority in their lives.

6.24 pm

Mr. Charles Clarke (Norwich, South): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Preston (Audrey Wise) on her speech and on the priority she gives to children's health, which is extremely important. I am sure that all Labour Members share her priorities.

I should like to pay tribute to my predecessor, John Garrett, who was first elected in February 1974. Many hon. Members will know him not only for his contribution to the promotion of good management throughout the public services—and, indeed, the private services—but for being a scourge of complacency in the civil service through his membership of the Treasury and Civil Service Committee and, before he entered the House, for the advice he gave to the Fulton committee. He will be warmly remembered, particularly in Norwich, for the consistently tremendous work he did for the constituents of Norwich, South and in promoting the interests of the city of Norwich.

It is a tremendous honour to have been elected to represent Norwich, South—the southern part of the great city of Norwich. It is an historic city; the former second city of England. It has an historic cathedral, a Norman castle, a guildhall, monastic buildings in Blackfriars and a mediaeval city centre. It is an educational centre, with the university of East Anglia being one of this country's outstanding universities. It has a city college, which is entering into tremendous new agreements to give the young people of our city, through partnership with Bull Technology, the information technology qualifications that are needed in the modern world.

Norwich research park has a series of institutions that put Norwich at the forefront of food research in Britain. One of the things about which I am delighted is the commitment in the Queen's Speech to establish an independent food standards agency, which we in Norwich will be urging should be located in our city as a principal researcher into the quality of food.

The headquarters of The Stationery Office, which publishes *Hansard*, is located in Norwich. Despite the depredation of the sell-off that the previous Government ordered, The Stationery Office intends to provide the Government with the quality of service that it has historically provided.

Norwich is a regional financial centre. The headquarters of Norwich Union and Sedgwick's are located there. There are tremendous resources in the city for all financial services. It is also of course the culture and media capital of the region, producing regional television programmes and being home to the Broads national park authority, which extends within the boundaries of my constituency. There is a theatre and art college, and the city is home to the Canaries, who are hoping to return to the Premier League, although I regret to say not for the coming season.

I am glad that the people of Norwich strongly support the Queen's Speech and the themes of work, welfare, education and health. They know that youth unemployment must be tackled and that only the Labour party's proposals for a windfall tax to provide jobs, education and training for young people can do so. They know that a minimum wage is needed—specifically in Norwich and Norfolk, where low pay is traditional. Indeed, my predecessor referred to the incidence of low pay in that part of the country in his maiden speech in 1974. The people of Norwich will welcome the commitment to a minimum wage.

The people of Norwich will also welcome the commitment to minimum class sizes of 30 pupils for five, six and seven-year-olds. Some primary school classes in my constituency have as many as 39 pupils. The people of Norwich know that the changes will make a substantial difference. Norfolk as a whole has been the subject of the previous Government's guinea-pig approach to nursery vouchers, which caused major problems in Norwich. We are delighted that a proper nursery scheme will be established through the state education system and that the nursery voucher scheme will be abolished.

I should like to focus on a specific, small health measure: the measure to clarify the legal power of national health service trusts to sign private finance initiative contracts. I hope that the Bill to implement that will have a rapid and trouble-free passage through both Houses. It is needed because banks are holding back from signing PFI contracts—public-private partnerships—because they are uncertain about the legal status of NHS trusts. There may be other reasons, but that is one. As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister said yesterday, one of the Labour Government's missions is to remove the red tape that has stopped investment in the health service. By clarifying the legal status of hospital trusts, we will enable the acceleration of public-private partnerships and investment in health and the building of new hospitals and health facilities. I strongly support the measure in the Queen's Speech and the accelerated resources for health that it will offer.

The issue is especially relevant to Norwich, because a PFI scheme for the Norfolk and Norwich hospital awaits agreement from the banks, having been signed in November. The scheme faces the obstacles that I mentioned earlier. From our experience in Norwich, we welcome the election of a Government who are committed to developing private-public partnerships more successfully than in the past.

Under the previous arrangements, the people of Norwich were not allowed to know—for reasons of so-called commercial confidentiality—which services, ranging from clinical services to canteen cleaning, would be included in the PFI arrangement. The local people were not permitted to know which specialisms would be

available at the new hospital; the prices that would be charged for services; or what guarantees the previous Government had to give to sustain the deal. They were not permitted to know about any future plans for existing hospital sites, even though hospitals had been closed, thus reducing total bed numbers in Norwich. They were not permitted to know what transportation arrangements had been made to ensure that people could use the new hospital on the outskirts of the city at Colney. It would have been better if the new hospital, like the old, had been planned for the city centre—as originally proposed—instead of outside.

The Labour Government are not responsible for the flawed process that led to the PFI agreement, but they will have to do their best with their inheritance. The Bill that was announced yesterday will accelerate the process and I welcome it. I know that the new Government will use the Bill to build a much more democratic, open and accountable procedure under which people can learn about the investments under the PFI schemes and public-private partnerships. We will encourage more much-needed private resources for, and greater investment in, health, and we will also encourage a system that allows people to participate fully in the discussions, unlike the PFI schemes that the previous Government operated. We will end the unaccountable secrecy of the unelected quangos, as my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister said yesterday, and we will establish the necessary public, open discussions and a new flow of investment.

The people of Norwich, South welcomed the Gracious Speech yesterday. They know that it will make a dramatic difference to the people of the city of Norwich. I have great honour and pride in speaking in the House today and commending the Speech to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

6.33 pm

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): I congratulate the hon. Member for Norwich, South (Mr. Clarke), whom I know well, on his maiden speech. I welcome him to the House. I also welcome his contribution to the city of Norwich which, as he said, is one of the great cities of England. I have no doubt that the hon. Gentleman will be a redoubtable Member of Parliament for his constituents. He used to be the boss of the Cambridge Students Union, well before new Labour. If, when he was CSU president and I was president of my college union, I had predicted that he would be elected to Parliament on a wave of new Labour policies, he would have shown me the door. Even student politics have changed greatly since the 1970s. *[Interruption.]* Public-private capital in the health service is just another example of this change.

Not all hon. Members may know that the hon. Member for Norwich, South also did a good job at the right hand of Neil Kinnock when he was leader of the Labour party, and I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman for that—I know that he was hugely important to the success of all that Neil Kinnock sought to do.

I was serious when I said that I appreciate the commitment and passion of the speech by the hon. Member for Preston (Audrey Wise) on the health service. I am sure that she will be firm and true to her commitment to keep the pressure on what is now her Government to ensure that the health service has the resources that it needs. Of course the Government need to look at the

books, but nobody who works in the health service believes that it has enough money. I am sure that the hon. Lady knows that, and I look to her and to people like her to tell the truth about next month's Budget and the funding of the health service. I am sure that many of her voters also look to her to do that.

The hon. Member for Shipley (Mr. Leslie) is no longer in his place, but I pay tribute to him—the youngest Member of the House. When I was elected, I was the youngest Opposition Member at 31. He has come to the House at the age of 24 and relieves my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and St. Austell (Mr. Taylor) of a responsibility that he has carried for more than 10 years. That shows how middle-aged we have become. Unless the House continues to become more representative in age, as well as in gender and colour, we shall not be recognised as properly representative at all.

How we become politically representative is another debate. Suffice it to say that the present Government no more have the support of the majority of the British public than did the previous Government: we are all minorities here and I hope that we shall all have the humility to remember that.

I also wish to compliment the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Mrs. Stuart). I welcome her to the House because, among other reasons, she is greatly committed to electoral reform and to positive progress in Europe. Her constituency has much to commend it—not least the fact that my parents, so they told me, met in Edgbaston at the end of the war and I have studied there and stayed with relatives. I welcome the hon. Lady and all the new Members, especially the women; I sincerely hope that one day at least half the Members of Parliament will be women, as befits a nation more than half of whose citizens are women.

We have a new ministerial team and I welcome them. I wish them well, without qualification. They have a huge responsibility. I should have liked to be in their place because I do not do this job to be in opposition, but I am encouraged by the fact that I now have many more hon. Friends around me and we have made significant progress. The teams with responsibility for health, social security and education have a particular responsibility: they have to build a new welfare state for the next century. That will not be easy and we shall have a great debate about how to fund it. I hope that there will be no no-go areas for that debate. We must open all the doors and consider all the ideas. I welcome the appointment of the Minister for Welfare Reform, the hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field), because he is a thinker and a brave contributor to that debate. I welcome in particular my two parliamentary colleagues, the right hon. Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) and the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Ms Jowell), to their important jobs. The borough of Southwark is well represented on the health and social services agenda on the non-Tory Benches and I am sure that that is what the people of Southwark want.

Whatever the politicians said—including the three party leaders—I believe that the public felt that health was the most important issue in the election. The party leaders claimed that education came first, but the public chose health. That was the evidence of the opinion polls, nationally, regionally and locally. In London and in my constituency—now called Southwark, North and Bermondsey—health was undoubtedly the main issue.

[Mr. Simon Hughes]

It is therefore a privilege for me to return to Parliament to do the job of health spokesman for my party again, and it is a great privilege now also to have the unsolicited but extremely welcome addition of three colleagues to help me—my hon. Friend the Member for Hereford (Mr. Keetch), who is sitting on the Bench in front of me, and my hon. Friends the Members for Isle of Wight (Dr. Brand) and for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris). I know from my experience in the general election campaign that health was a huge issue in each of those seats, too.

I welcome in addition my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park (Dr. Tonge), who is sitting behind me and is one of our three new Liberal Democrat doctor Members. I know that in her constituency, as in almost every other, health was a hugely important issue. Only yesterday, services at Queen Mary's, Roehampton—a hospital serving her constituents—were said to be at risk again.

None of us will be under more political pressure than when health service reductions are threatened in our constituencies, because the health service is the most valued public service in the United Kingdom: 95 per cent. of our citizens use it and we must do our best to preserve it.

Let me now sound one note of dissent. I am one of the few Members who was elected by beating Labour. I have done it five times now, so I hope that the Labour party has got the message.

Mr. Dorrell: I beat Labour, too.

Mr. Hughes: The right hon. Member for Charnwood (Mr. Dorrell) says that he beat Labour, too. I also beat the Tories, and I beat them down to 6 per cent. They got 10 per cent. of the vote at the last election, and I did not think that I would get them much lower, but I got them down to 6 per cent. this time, so the possibility of squeezing the Tory vote has now really been reduced in my constituency. To his credit, however, the Tory candidate in my constituency managed to elevate his position from being the candidate with the lowest share of the Tory vote in England to the lowest but one—there was an even lower Tory vote in a Liverpool constituency—so he will obviously be promoted to a better seat next time.

I shall start with a local issue, and then deal with some of the wider issues in the Queen's Speech. The big issue in my constituency in this election was unquestionably the future of Guy's hospital. When I was in the United States for a week last year studying health service matters, people in famous hospitals on the east coast could not believe that the British Government could contemplate running down a hospital like Guy's. They found that inconceivable. During the election campaign, one of the promises made by the Labour candidate in my constituency was that on the first day of a Labour Government Guy's hospital would be saved. A few days passed after the election before the *Hampstead and Highgate Express* published a conversation with the new Secretary of State confirming that a review of London health services would take place. The test will come over the first year.

For Londoners, and for my constituents, the first real test of whether the Government do their job properly on health will be whether the Minister of State sets about his review with no preconditions or prior agenda, conducts the review using up-to-date facts and statistics—unlike the review under Tomlinson, which was out of date, partial and ignored some of the evidence—and delivers a set of proposals for the future of the health service in London which have been the subject and reflect the results of wide consultation. [Interruption.] The former Secretary of State intervenes from a sedentary position, as he always used to do. I will give way, of course, in a moment.

The intervening period is hugely important. Labour said that in London there would be no rundown or closures of services for the period of the review. That should apply across the country, as we said. We committed the funding for it, unlike Labour. That undertaking must now be carried out. For me and for my constituents, that means the trauma service at Guy's not disappearing before the end of the review and entire departments not being shifted to another hospital. The review must freeze the present position and examine fairly all the services, including casualty, at hospitals such as Guy's.

Mr. Dorrell: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. He said that he wanted an open-ended review with no preconceptions and a proper analysis of the evidence. We already know that we shall not get any of that. The Secretary of State has already announced that he is ruling out a possible conclusion of the review when he said that the Government will not end up endorsing the previous Government's policies. That is one conclusion that he has ruled out before the review begins. He has also made it clear that the review has seven months to proceed and complete a process which, when it was initiated by Tomlinson, took three years and engaged a huge consultation exercise leading to the decisions that were announced in April 1995. We already know that the review will take place in a much shorter time scale than last time, and that one possible conclusion—I do not comment on whether it would be the right or the wrong conclusion—has been ruled out by the Secretary of State.

Mr. Hughes: I have great respect for the former Secretary of State. In many respects I think that he did an extremely good job as a Tory Secretary of State for Health. He was not responsible for the last review, and I acquit him of that. It is reasonable to assume that a new Government would not expect to revisit all the questions. It would not be credible for them to say that a review would take place but that the outcome would be identical. On that point I defend the new Secretary of State for Health.

I share the concern of the right hon. Member for Charnwood that it may be impractical to think that we can sort out all the problems in a short time, but people do not want to be kept in limbo for months and years. It is a difficult balance to strike. I represent staff at Guy's who want to know their future.

On this, as on other matters, I hope that we shall perform the task properly and that in this Parliament we do not have arguments over facts. I say that especially to new colleagues. Let us have arguments over funding and policy, but let us not argue over clear and incontrovertible facts. I hope that one of the signs of a new regime in government is that we do not get hundreds of answers on

health service questions—for example, how many hospitals have been closed and how many beds there are—all stating that the information is not held centrally. No colleague on either side of the House will be happy if we get a stone wall of silence about what is going on in the health service so that no one can find out what the score is locally, regionally or nationally.

I shall continue my resistance, should the Government not deliver on these matters adequately. I am still blocking a Bill, which got blocked before the end of the last Parliament, that would bring about a merger of the United Medical and Dental school and King's college London. I shall continue to do so unless we get satisfactory assurances about adequate numbers of beds at my local hospital.

I wish to make four points about the Queen's Speech. The first was made similarly yesterday by my right hon. Friend the Member for Yeovil (Mr. Ashdown), and my hon. Friend the Member for Bath (Mr. Foster) made it today in the context of education. I do not think that any objective analyst believes that there is sufficient money in the kitty to sustain the NHS as at present demanded by the citizens of the United Kingdom. I quote from the election briefing of the Institute for Fiscal Studies—not a party organisation—which stated:

"The real growth in health spending planned over the next three years is well below average spending growth in health over any recent parliament, or indeed over any period of consecutive years . . .

The projected growth in health spending over the next three years is far lower than the average growth in health spending since the Conservatives took office in 1979, or at any time over the last thirty-five years. . .

Either they"—

the current spending plans—

"are unfeasible, and will be broken, or they will mean a much lower injection of new resources into the health service than hitherto experienced. At a time when the public's demand for health care is inevitably rising, this will have serious implications for how well the NHS will be able to continue its role as a comprehensive provider of free health care."

I say to Members on the Labour Benches that they were timid on health service spending before the election and during the election. It was only the moment before the election that they suddenly announced that they would spend as much as the Tories; previously, they said that they would spend less. That was because the right hon. Member for Charmwood and I had a go at them every Question Time until eventually they decided that it was so embarrassing to be third in the spending league table that they had better do something about it.

If the Labour Government carry on the synchronised swimming—having the same budget for health as the Tories—they will be in trouble. I say that in the hope and expectation that the wisdom of government will descend on the new Chancellor of the Exchequer and the new Secretary of State for Health and that they will say, as Governments so rarely do, "We are sorry. We were wrong. We need more money, and it is better to tell you that than to pretend otherwise." We look forward to that process beginning in the Budget next month. If that does not take place, we shall vote against the relevant parts of the Budget and we shall table amendments to increase funding for the health service, as we have consistently argued over recent years.

Secondly, I welcome the Government's stated intention to end the two-tier health service. The great failing of the Tory reforms was that patients received different

treatment depending on which doctor they went to or where they lived. It is absolutely true that, as of today, the NHS is still a national health lottery. If we are to put that right and end the difference between fundholders and non-fundholders, we need to do so in a way that receives support from those in the profession and elsewhere. I welcome the fact that there will be consultation, and that it may not be necessary to legislate. If that is the case, we must have consultation about the proposed instructions, guidance and directions as though we were discussing legislation. Having got it so wrong last time, I do not want us—and patients do not want us—to get it wrong again.

Thirdly, I wish to refer to the private finance initiative. The hon. Member for Norwich, South welcomed the Bill—which I gather is to be published in another place tomorrow—to facilitate private finance coming into the NHS. That is not an uncontroversial matter. The only reason why we are going down that road is that the previous Government slashed capital spending in the NHS. There may be an argument for bringing private money into the capital budget of the health service, but last year the Treasury, the Treasury Select Committee, various financial advisers and certainly the Labour party were not persuaded by it. I do not think that, as of today, the public are persuaded either.

If we are to build a secure NHS—with the buildings, hospitals and facilities that we want—we must seek agreement about how to bring in private finance. I welcome the fact that, in theory, it is on the agenda. If the Government are seeking to push through a Bill to allow projects that have been in the pipeline for some time to be built—such as the example referred to in Norwich or such as Rochdale—some hard questions will be asked about whether that secures either the best investment of public finances or the best security for the NHS. Effectively leasing hospital buildings that one does not get back in 35 years may not be a good way of spending public money. A lot of people need to be persuaded about that proposal.

Finally, I wish to refer to public health. I welcome the appointment of a Minister for public health. The hon. Member for Preston is absolutely right in implying that the NHS is a national sickness service—and the more it is such a service, the poorer our public health will be. In most respects, we have not a national health service, but a national sickness service. We are rescuing people whom we have allowed to fall into the river rather than stopping them falling in in the first place.

The Government are right to single out smoking as one of the most pernicious routes to ill health. Smoking kills 100,000-plus people a year in this country—I am not sure of the arithmetic, but I believe that that works out at 300 people per day dying as a result of tobacco-related diseases. I ask the Government to be as tough as nails on this. There must be no backsliding or equivocation. There must be no tobacco advertising, except at the point of sale, and no tobacco sponsorship of sport—even if that means that sport has difficulties for a short period. The idea that a racing driver—or a snooker player or a darts player—gains success partly by being associated with smoking has to be hit on the head. Smoking kills you, and if it does not kill you, it debilitates you, puts you out of work and gives your family and friends a harder time. We have to be tough on smoking and tough on the causes of smoking. *[Interruption.]* I mean that. If this House does not deliver, we will betray our responsibility.

[Mr. Hughes]

In addition, we must be tough on alcohol and tough on the causes of alcoholism—particularly among women, where there has been an increase. We must also be tough on drugs and tough on the causes. I do not mean illegal drugs only, but I mean drugs in the NHS which are often given with no proven benefit to the patient. There are far too many drugs given as a quick answer to a difficult question. Alternative remedies and alternative medicines are often a better way forward.

It is a source of great pride in my party that the plan for the welfare state was devised by a great Liberal who became a Member of the House of Commons and then a peer—William Beveridge. He made it clear when he wrote his report in 1943 that a precondition of a successful welfare state was a successful national health service. I share the view of many hon. Members and many voters that the best test of whether we shall have a successful welfare state for the next century is whether we build a successful health service for the next century that will survive.

I hope that, as a House, we shall be united in trying to make the national health service stronger, and that we shall spend more time doing that than having a go at other people where there may be differences as to how to achieve it. We have a collective responsibility for the national health service and the welfare state, and a collective duty in this Parliament to do a hell of a lot about it.

6.56 pm

Mr. Desmond Turner (Brighton, Kemptown): It is with great pride that I rise for the first time in this House representing Brighton, Kemptown. I should like to follow the tradition of the House and recognise my predecessor, Sir Andrew Bowden. He was a very hard man to remove, and held on to a marginal seat for 27 years. He did so largely because he was an effective constituency Member of Parliament who was extremely popular with his constituents and worked hard on their behalf. Although he was a Tory, I give him all credit for that. If I can establish an equal reputation to Sir Andrew's with my constituents, I shall be well satisfied.

I want to refer also to my predecessor's predecessor, the late Dennis Hobden, who was the first Labour Member of Parliament in Sussex. He won in 1964 by seven votes after four recounts and, if the House will bear with me, I shall explain how it was done. Before the election, the Conservative agent spoke to one of our organisers and asked whether he thought it was safe for his man to go on holiday in case the election was called. Our lad said, "You are an agent. You know the last person you want around your feet when an election is called is the candidate. Let him go." Two days later, the election was called, and the banner headline appeared in the local *Evening Argus*:

"Tory MP hunts Loch Ness monster".

He lost by seven votes. That is an election strategy which I should like to commend to Opposition Members for future use.

My constituency is fascinating. My right hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman) yesterday pointed out that the levels of unemployment and

social deprivation in his inner-city constituency in Manchester made the Queen's Speech relevant, because it addressed those issues. He added that his constituents would be happy with it. Hon. Members will be familiar with the elegant Regency facades of my constituency, but they hide levels of unemployment and deprivation that are exactly comparable with Gorton. There are areas of my constituency where one household in two has no one working. Our unemployment is double the national average—just about comparable with the unemployment in Gorton.

It therefore came as no surprise, certainly to me, that as we conducted our triumphal tour of the constituency the day after the election, people were hanging out of office windows shouting and cheering. People were really happy: they were going around the supermarkets with a new spring in their step. It was as if a great black cloud had been lifted from the nation, because we no longer had a Government who told us what could not be done.

That was the substance of the speech that we heard this afternoon from the former Secretary of State for Social Security, the right hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr. Lilley). It was all about being negative—about saying, "You cannot do this; you have to suffer." Now people feel better, because they know that they have a Government who talk not about what they cannot do but about what they can do, and who will set about doing it. They will not be able to produce miracles at first—no one expects that—but they will make every honest attempt.

There was so much in the Queen's Speech. It really was radical. One could not imagine the Opposition producing anything as radical in their wildest nightmares.

There is high unemployment on the estates in one of the wards that I represent. Earlier this afternoon, there was some doubt about where Roedean was; I assure hon. Members that it is in my constituency, right next to—I believe—the third most socially deprived area in the country, where the effects of the windfall tax will really be felt. It will take young people off the dole, and put them into work or training for the first time.

Yes, we have problems of crime on our estates. That is not surprising: there are young people there who do not know what it means to have a job, because they have never had the opportunity of having one. Many of those young people will now have jobs. They will have a reason for getting up in the morning, and something to look forward to in life.

Brighton has another distinction—an unfortunate distinction. Along with Manchester, it is in the premier division in many respects, but not the ones that we would like. We would almost prefer the relegation of Brighton and Hove Albion to the levels of unemployment and deprivation that go with being in the premier division, along with some other inner-city constituencies. We have the highest level of homelessness outside certain London boroughs, and that is not funny. Walking around Brighton, we see just as many rough sleepers as can be seen in central London.

The ability to build again will make a significant contribution. That is only one part of the legislation proposed in the Queen's Speech, but it is a vital part. We must go back to building low-cost accommodation that people can afford. If we are to take people off the streets, we must have somewhere to put them. At present, we simply do not have the places in which to put all the

people who come knocking on our doors. It is tragic to have such appalling housing conditions as exist in large parts of my constituency, and the legislation will be devoutly welcomed there.

My constituents will also devoutly welcome the other main topic covered by the Queen's Speech—improvements in the health service. We have heard considerable debate about the health service this evening. The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) was right to speak of the difficulty of obtaining an accurate picture of what is happening across the health service, and the real situation bequeathed to us by the former Secretary of State for Health, the right hon. Member for Charnwood (Mr. Dorrell). At present, we can do that only by collecting anecdotal data. I know the anecdotal data for my constituency, and they do not make pretty reading.

For instance, the chief executive of our local health care trust—the acute trust—has instructed surgeons not to treat anyone who has not been on the waiting list for at least 15 months for non-urgent surgery, except of course the patients of fundholding practices. In that case, it will depend on how generously funded the fundholding GP happens to feel at the time. It is not even a two-tier health service; it is a multi-tier health service, and “a lottery” is a very accurate description of it. The position is unacceptable, and we will abolish that lottery. Not only do we want equality of opportunity in education; we must have equality of opportunity when it comes to access to health care. That is probably old-fashioned socialism, but it is a principle—

Mr. Simon Hughes: We shall vote for it.

Mr. Turner: I thank the hon. Gentleman. I thought that he might. I believe that this is an area of common ground, on which we shall be happy to work.

It does not end there. Our health care trust has just closed a few wards—only a few, but they happen to be very important. They were highly specialist surgical wards dealing with specific types of cancer. The patients will now have to go to general surgical wards. The specialist teams have been broken up, and there is only one possible outcome: people will die, because their cancers—I am talking mainly about cancers of the colon and rectum—will not be diagnosed and treated as early as they might be. Those patients' chances of survival have been seriously impaired.

Is that the record bequeathed by a Government who proudly proclaimed that the health service was safe in their hands, and that they were continually spending more on the health service year on year? Why, then, are our health trusts in deficit? Why are they having to make damaging, life-threatening cuts? Only now are we able to find out just where the black holes in the health service are, and just what the truth is. It will be some time before we know what is needed for us to be able to deal with those black holes.

Believe me, it is a sorry inheritance that we have come into; but at least the people of Kemptown, and the people of Britain, now know that they have a Government who are committed to doing something about it. The first evidence is before us in the Queen's Speech—and as for all the doubts that we have heard from Opposition Members this afternoon, let us just wait a year and see what happens. That is the test.

7.8 pm

Mr. Piers Merchant (Beckenham): I welcome you to your new elevated role, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I do so with great pleasure—and it is also a delight to follow the maiden speech of the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Mr. Turner), which was of evidently high quality. It was fluent, delivered with the aid of hardly a note and most impressive in content and style. I am sure that the House will enjoy many more speeches from the hon. Gentleman in the not too distant future.

The hon. Gentleman paid a generous tribute to his predecessor, describing him as a hard act to remove; I am sure that he will also find him a hard act to follow, but his speech gives me confidence that he will succeed, and I wish him the best of luck.

I did not agree, however, with the hon. Gentleman's remarks about the speech of my right hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr. Lilley), which was of the highest quality and aptly reflected the views of Conservative Members. The only sadness is that my right hon. Friend is not at present able to sit on the Government Benches, perhaps in a different position from the one that he held before, to continue in the work of fundamental reform that he conducted so ably in his Department over the past five years.

Several matters referred to in the Gracious Speech are of considerable interest to my constituents and reflect the concern that they expressed during the general election campaign about aspects of Labour party policy. For the sake of brevity, as I know that many hon. Members are waiting to speak, I shall refer to only two such matters.

The first matter concerns health. The Labour party has, to put it mildly, been difficult to pin down over the past few years on policy for capital provision for the health service, and the private finance initiative in particular. At first, the party appeared to favour the abolition of the PFI; then it moved to advocating a review; and the latest position appears to favour amending the PFI. Perhaps we shall hear later whether the party has decided to support the PFI.

Certainly, the reference in the Gracious Speech to the Bill that will clarify the legal position of NHS trusts seemed to suggest that the new Government are prepared to run with the PFI. I hope, in the interests of practicality, that that is the case and that there has been a conversion. Clarification on that point would be helpful, not for the purposes of theory—interesting though that is—but for good practical reasons. A great number of major hospital projects that are now on stream were put together under the PFI; many are ready to be signed off and simply await Treasury approval.

As a matter of simple responsibility, the Government owe it to the health trusts and to the people in those areas to give a clear indication as soon as possible of whether the schemes will survive, because if they are not signed off shortly, they will quickly lose their relevance and become impractical.

I have a local vested interest, as an excellent package has been put together, based on the PFI, for a new Bromley district general hospital. The project is at the point of being signed off and can go ahead if the Government are prepared to move rapidly; if they are not, the project in its current form will collapse and the people of my area will be deprived, at least for the near future, of a new hospital. That is an important matter for the

[*Mr. Piers Merchant*]

future of health care in the area that I represent: the quality of that care depends on a new hospital, and there is no other way of overcoming the historical difficulties.

A tremendous amount of work has been done, and people at all levels—clinical staff, patients, future patients and administrators, who are often castigated but have in this case worked extremely hard to put the project together—need to know whether the project will work and can go ahead. At the very least, they need some assurance about whether the project's general basis, together with a timetable for the next few steps, will be accepted.

If that is not forthcoming, those in charge of the project will need to know whether the rug is to be pulled from under their feet and they are to be denied their new hospital, because they will then have to consider future plans, square it with the local population and explain that, unfortunately, the serious problems in the local NHS cannot be solved. I hope that the Government will have the sense not to follow that latter course, because if they do so, they will have some severe explaining to do to local people and will undoubtedly be blamed for delays in improving provision. I hope that the Government will respond to that point as early as possible, and preferably tonight.

The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) in an, as usual, interesting and thorough speech, referred to tobacco advertising and the health problems associated with tobacco. For a long time, I was against further restrictions on tobacco advertising. I formed that view as a result of the time that I spent working in the advertising industry.

I was not involved in tobacco advertising, but I became aware of the way in which advertising works and formed the view that controlling tobacco advertising has a smaller impact on consumption than is often fondly imagined. I have to an extent changed my position over the years, because I feel so strongly about the health aspects, and I am now more drawn towards an acceptance of a ban on tobacco advertising, as long as it is imposed in the clear understanding that it will not achieve the dramatic effects that many of those who argue in favour of it suggest, and as long as it is accompanied by other, in my view, more meaningful measures to restrict tobacco consumption.

In other words, if the ban is to be merely a gesture and an attempt to pretend that there is a genuine desire to reduce tobacco consumption, I do not consider it a convincing strategy, but if the Government can show that it is part of a coherent and serious drive to reduce consumption, I shall find it much more palatable. Reduction in consumption is much more important than mere gestures to appease those who argue in favour of a ban.

The second item that I want to talk about concerns education policy. I hope that the Secretary of State, who has already referred to the Greenwich judgment in response to an intervention from the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey, will be more specific on that subject. He said that he felt that a change in the law—the only way of reversing the Greenwich judgment—was unlikely. I wonder whether I could encourage him or one of the Ministers in his Department to be a little more specific and make it clear whether he is ruling out any primary legislation or is leaving the door

open. The judgment cannot be taken any further through the court system, so primary legislation in this place would be needed to overturn it.

If the Secretary of State is not prepared to do that, is he saying effectively that he is not prepared to do anything to answer the legitimate and deeply felt concerns of my constituents about the fact that, in next year's secondary school admissions, a minimum of 804—that is the present figure—out-of-borough pupils will take school places in the London borough of Bromley, while 600 pupils in the borough do not have places in local schools? It is no longer a small issue. In my borough, it is a major issue that is causing parents severe stress. The problem must be sorted out one way or another. I hope that the Government realise the urgency of the effect of the Greenwich judgment.

I applaud the Government for their commitment to continue to improve education standards, which was a major element of the previous Government's policy. I welcome that, but I wonder how schools, parents, teachers and pupils will react if the impact of further changes is another major reorganisation that causes tremendous stress, dislocation and problems. There is a limit to the extent to which the structure of any large service, whether health or education, can be reorganised. The costs are not only financial but human and they affect the product—in this case, the quality of education.

The new Government will no doubt be motivated by zeal and by the desire to do new things and to prove themselves. I hope that they do not fall into the trap, into which Governments of all parties have fallen in the past, of rushing in believing that they have a new radical system that will make everything right. In rushing it into effect, they may find that they produce more problems than they solve. That is a danger for education, because teachers in particular have had to go through so much change in recent years. It was all intended for the best and I believe that most of it has been successful, but some of it has not been. For teachers to have to go through yet another change could prove counter-productive.

I especially hope that the Government will resist the temptation to use education as a political football and to introduce change for the sake of political dogma. I hope instead that they will err on the side of retaining stability in the system. The Government's approach to the assisted places scheme is a bad sign of what could happen, because I believe that the changes are based on political dogma. The Government will take away an education option from people in lower income brackets by depriving them of the opportunities offered by the scheme, which does not, as they sometimes argue, distort the system. Its abolition will not produce the funds that they pretend that it will. I am afraid that this is a bit of ideological spite, a mean-minded policy. It saddens me that they should want to pursue it, especially with the vigour that they intend. The people who will lose out will not be those whom the Government like to castigate as Tory voters, but will come from among their supporters and the groups that they pretend to champion.

Labour Members can perhaps be excused at present for feeling self-satisfied or even for gloating. I do not entirely blame them. Much of the thinking behind the Gracious Speech reflects that self-satisfaction. Nevertheless, the Government should even at this stage restrain themselves from thinking that they will have a free run. They should not underestimate the ability of my right hon. and

hon. Friends to scrutinise everything that they propose in this Queen's Speech or will propose in subsequent ones, nor the inner resilience that undoubtedly exists in the Conservative party.

7.23 pm

Mr. Tom Levitt (High Peak): Mr. Deputy Speaker, thank you for giving me the opportunity to make my maiden speech. I represent the most beautiful seat in Britain. I was going to claim that it was only the most beautiful seat in England, but I cannot see many Scottish or Welsh Members, so I think that I can claim Britain.

High Peak is in Derbyshire and takes in most of the Peak district as well as the historic towns of Buxton and Glossop and the land in between. We expected to scrape home in the seat, but having been returned with 51 per cent. of the vote, my belief in electoral reform has been shaken; perhaps it is not as necessary as I once thought. My election on 1 May completed the jigsaw for High Peak. We have a Labour borough council, a Labour county council, a Labour Member of the European Parliament and now a Labour Member of Parliament.

I mentioned Scotland a moment ago. High Peak has been described as Derbyshire's Scotland. It has hills, it is rather wet, it is in the north of the county and, since the county council elections, it has been a Tory-free zone. From that point of view, we have much to be proud of.

I am the first Labour Member since Peter Jackson to represent High Peak. He served from 1966 to 1970 and had a reputation in the House for having voted against the Labour Government more often than any other Labour Member in that period. I must tell my Front-Bench colleagues that that is not a reputation that I intend to match or surpass. I was proud to stand on the Labour manifesto. I am proud to have fought on Labour manifestos in three general elections. I will be proud to continue to work for the implementation of that Labour manifesto in the years to come.

Someone once said that people should not trust politicians with more than three passions. My three chosen passions are all relevant to the Queen's Speech. The first is disability. I have not been able to take up one parliamentary tip which I picked up yesterday by producing my book and saying how I had written it and how excellent it was. Suffice it to say that I hope to make progress on access to services for people with sensory impairments. My second field is local government. I served at parish, district and county level before coming here. Thirdly, there is education. I was a teacher for 17 years and I shall return to that issue.

There is one aspect of my past that I would like to celebrate. During the 1980s, I was both a parliamentary and European parliamentary candidate in Gloucestershire and actively involved in the campaign for the restoration of trade union rights at GCHQ. It gives me immense pride to make my maiden speech on the day those rights were restored.

My immediate predecessor in High Peak was Charles Hendry, who was, and may still be, a vice-chair of the Tory party with responsibility for communications. Perhaps the less said about that, the better. He looked after High Peak competently for five years. I congratulate him on not having taken the chicken run, as many of his colleagues did. He spent most of his career in the House, either advising Ministers or working for Tory central

office. Having achieved the position of Member of Parliament, to lose it after five years must, I concede, have been a devastating personal blow. My best wishes go to him and his young family in finding another career.

In Charles's final speech to the House just a few weeks ago, he invited hon. Members to come with him on an imaginary helicopter ride to see some of the examples of Tory success. It was by its nature a brief ride, but I would like to take hon. Members on a similar ride to look at some of the schools in High Peak and ask what we mean by "Tory success".

Let us start in the village of Tideswell, which has a large primary school where no child is taught in a class of less than 30. If we go to the town of Buxton, we can go one better. There is a reception class with 46 children in it. Still in Buxton, High Peak college is the only provider of further education in the constituency. It has fought hard to stay open recently. It has a purpose-built nursery, which is empty because the college can no longer afford to run it for the benefit of the students for whom it was intended. In the village of Whaley Bridge, an excellent private nursery is in danger of closing because it does not accept vouchers. Because of the short period for which people send their children to the nursery, vouchers are not appropriate for the style of nursery provision that it provides and it fears that it cannot survive.

A couple of miles away, at Taxal and Fernilee primary school, which was purpose-built by Derbyshire county council and the Church authorities working together just a few years ago, parents launched a £25,000 fund last weekend to build an extension to one of the classrooms because of severe overcrowding. It seems that the days are gone when parents were asked to provide the extras, not the essentials, for our children's education.

Dinting school in Glossop is an example of a school that is bursting at the seams. It must be impossible to teach there effectively, given the conditions and overcrowding. The fact that Hope valley is the most beautiful part of High Peak does not help Bamford primary school, which must lose one of its five teachers this summer. That will necessitate mixed-age classes and have a devastating effect on the confidence of staff and children in the school. My heart goes out to them.

As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister was visiting the village of Castleton during the election campaign, the local primary school was proud to be opening its first indoor toilet for use. For how many years had it been waiting to do that?

The final school on my list is Chapel infants school, Chapel-en-le-Frith, which was built in Victorian times. Despite its being a good school, the Victorian buildings are not in good repair. Not only are the classrooms too small, but right next to the school is a busy main road. Some 100 yd down that main road on the opposite side is another playground with the other half of the infant school. In the playground are four "temporary" classrooms—they were temporary when they were put there 45 years ago. Their roofs are held up by pit props, among the 700 pit props holding up roofs in Derbyshire schools. The fabric of that school is a disgrace, while the practice in its classrooms is excellent. The teachers in all the schools that I have mentioned do a wonderful job, given the highly undignified circumstances in which many of them and their pupils work.

[Mr. Tom Levitt]

It is no wonder that we have such problems in Derbyshire schools. Of all the shire counties, Derbyshire had the third lowest standard spending assessment for education under the previous Government. It has a £100 million backlog on capital spending, £10 million of which is urgently required. Last year, the previous Government allowed Derbyshire to spend some £800,000, or 0.8 per cent.—less than 1 per cent.—of the capital building requirement. The authority was asking not for money from the Government but for permission to borrow. Without that, it was impossible for the authority to address even the most serious of the capital and physical problems in the buildings which had to be put right.

One could guess from my description that Derbyshire has the highest primary class sizes of any shire county in the country. That is the Tory inheritance, in terms of education in Derbyshire and schools in High Peak. That is the legacy that we must turn round and put right, and that is how the last Government failed the people of High Peak.

During the election campaign, education was one of the major issues raised on every doorstep of every family with children. It is where the last Government failed and where the new Government, uniquely, will succeed. We shall succeed, because our priorities, especially the priority of education, have been set by the people. We have not imposed our agenda from outside; it has come from the doorsteps and classrooms of High Peak and beyond. The education of our children is our first priority. Our children have only one chance and this Government will give that chance to our children.

7.34 pm

Mr. Peter Luff (Mid-Worcestershire): It is my pleasant first obligation to welcome you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to the Chair and to congratulate you on your appointment. It is a great pleasure to see a friendly and a skilful face in the Chair and we look forward to your wise counsel prevailing over us for many years to come.

It is also a privilege to follow yet another fine maiden speech. I may have disagreed with the content and argument put forward in it, but it was another example of an articulate and skilfully argued speech, which put some older hon. Members to shame. I have considerably more notes in my hand than the hon. Member for High Peak (Mr. Levitt), and I congratulate him on his fine speech and wish him a successful and happy period in the House. He should not take it personally if I say that I hope that he will not stay too long.

I am glad that the hon. Gentleman paid a generous tribute to his predecessor, Charles Hendry. This is the sort of debate in which Charles would have wished to speak. He was committed to the welfare of everyone in our country, as all Conservative Members are. His passionate work for the homeless in the all-party homelessness group bears testimony to his sense of compassion and concern. He will be sadly missed in the House for his expression of the authentic voice of one-nation Toryism.

As far as I could see, the Gracious Speech was a strange mixture of soundbite politics, dogma and a limited dose of common sense. Tonight, I shall concentrate on the dogma that characterised too much of the Queen's Speech. First,

I refer to the words of an earlier Member of the House, Mr. Edmund Burke. The Edmund Burke Society kindly sent every Member of the House a copy of his speech to the electors of Bristol of November 1774—more than 200 years ago. It made terrifying reading in terms of the illumination that it offered to the Government's programme and our general political situation because it was so deeply contemporary. I wonder whether Edmund Burke was prophesying the behaviour of the Minister without Portfolio, the hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson), or perhaps the Prime Minister, when he said:

"To be a good member of parliament, is, let me tell you, no easy task; especially at this time, when there is so strong a disposition to run into the perilous extremes of servile compliance or wild popularity."

I wonder whether he was foreseeing the regrettable arrogance that is creeping into the Labour party's treatment of this place and its rush to overpopular legislation when he said:

"government and legislation are matters of reason and judgment, and not of inclination; and what sort of reason is that, in which the determination precedes the discussion; in which one set of men deliberate, and another decide".

Were you not now on the other side, Mr. Deputy Speaker, you would agree that those are strangely prescient words. I am sure that, in your previous incarnation, you would have agreed.

Unemployment is, rightly, a matter that concerns the new Government. I would have been more appreciative of their concern had they paid fuller tribute to the previous Government's achievements in that regard. After all, this economy has the lowest unemployment of any major European economy. That happened not by accident but as a result of Government policies. I am staggered by the scale of the reduction in my constituency. Library figures show that, over the past year, unemployment in Mid-Worcestershire fell by 34.7 per cent. to 1,240—a reduction of 660 compared with just a year ago. I welcome the huge reductions that have taken place. However, it is staggering that the Government's attachment to a number of dogmatic principles means that they are probably the first in British political history to come to this House with a Gracious Speech that makes pledges to the people of this country that will increase unemployment, for that is the direct effect of three of their pledges.

The first is the windfall tax, which cannot be paid out of some pot of gold that will do no harm to the rest of the economy. It will be paid for in one of three ways. First, it may be paid for through increased prices for the products of those utilities that must eventually bear that tax. Secondly, it may come out of reduced investment, which will cut employment in the capital goods sector. Thirdly, it may come out of the dividends that would otherwise go to those who hold the shares—the pension funds. In fact, ordinary people will pay the price one way or the other. I suspect that one major impact of that tax will be its effect on unemployment because of the reduction in capital spending by those utilities.

The windfall tax is but one of three pledges in the Queen's Speech that will increase unemployment. Another is the pledge on the national minimum wage. The Deputy Prime Minister has admitted that any damn fool knows that that will cause some kind of shake-out in employment. There it is—an unemployment-increasing pledge at the heart of the Queen's Speech.

The most bizarre and extraordinary pledge is that on the opt-in to the social chapter. We have all the evidence in the world from German and French industrialists and international commentators that our opt-out from the social chapter made us a unique magnet within the European Union for inward investment. It is clear that that opt-out was crucial to maintaining that high investment. We now read a bizarre oxymoron in the Queen's Speech, which promises to "improve competitiveness", yet in the same sentence promises that we will

"opt into the Social Chapter".

That is simply untenable. The opt-in to the social chapter will inevitably increase unemployment. It is another example of dogma triumphing over reason.

I am afraid that the Government have again fallen prey to dogma in relation to the health service. In my county of Worcestershire, 85 per cent. of the county's general practitioners are now fundholders. That offers enormous benefits, not just to the 85 per cent. of patients in those fundholding practices but to the other 15 per cent., because that initiative has improved the quality of health care across the national health service. It has levelled up and not levelled down the quality of health care available to all my constituents. As so often in the past, that difference represents the crucial distinction between the two sides of the House.

There are two fundholding practices and one non-fundholding practice in the town of Droitwich Spa. Those GPs have adopted imaginative approaches, including taking advantage of improvements in technology, to produce a dramatic improvement in the quality of health care available locally. All that will be put at risk by the Government's dogmatic insistence on overturning fundholding and replacing it with some kind of meddling commissioning group. I do not know what such groups will be like—we may hear about that later today or in the next few weeks. It is clear, however, that they will be quangos—the great enemy that was attacked a little while ago by the Labour party.

It is obvious that fundholding puts the power where it should be—in the hands of the general practitioner, the man or woman who knows what his or her patients need. Fundholding represents a profoundly democratic approach; by abolishing it, the Government will reduce the level of democracy in the NHS, not increase it.

I love the story about the old days before our reforms when GPs used to send Christmas cards to the consultants at hospitals because they desperately needed their good favour if they were to get their patients treated. There was a two-tier health service then—whether a GP's patients got on to a consultant's list depended on how well that GP got on with the consultant. It was a matter of who one knew and how one could work the system. That two-tier health service has been swept away by fundholding. Instead, the consultants now send Christmas cards to GPs because they want their custom, favour and patients to treat. That is a wonderful illustration of the reversal of power within the NHS, but the Government are dogmatically seeking to overturn that. Fundholding means decentralising, but the Government are set upon recentralising. That is profoundly regrettable.

Before I return to my theme about dogma in the Queen's Speech, I must pause to pay tribute to one of the more sensible measures in it. I am absolutely delighted that it includes a commitment to introduce a Bill to clarify

the relationship between NHS trusts and the private sector in terms of the provision of capital for new hospital building.

I have a special relationship with the new Minister of State at the Department of Health, the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Ms Jowell), because she is my pair. That relationship was put in some jeopardy when she descended on Worcester unannounced in the run-up to the election. She made certain statements about the local hospital, but I will forgive and forget that particular lapse.

As the hon. Lady will know, the proposed new hospital in Worcester lies outside my new constituency, but it will serve all my constituents. That building project is at a crucial, advanced stage. The consortium that wants to build that hospital places great importance on the proposed Bill. I thank the Government sincerely for picking up a piece of legislation that was developed by the current Secretary of State's predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Mr. Dorrell), which would have featured in our own Queen's Speech. I am aware that my right hon. Friend, the NHS generally, the health authority and the trust have done a huge amount of work to bring the new hospital building to fruition at last. I am delighted that the final obstacle—the lack of clarity concerning the relationship between the private sector and NHS trusts—will be swept aside.

I am still concerned that the hon. Lady was unable to answer some of the direct questions that I put to her after her visit about that hospital project. For example, I asked whether she would sweep aside the apparently strong opposition of the union in Worcester to the development of a hospital that used private capital. She failed to say whether the consortium that had been accepted to build the hospital was undoubtedly acceptable to the Labour party.

I am still unclear about the status of the review of the private finance initiative. Will that review last for days, weeks or months? How will it relate to the Bill referred to in the Queen's Speech? I sincerely hope that all those obstacles are removed. If they are, I shall be the first to express my gratitude to the Labour party for picking up our policy and running with it to ensure that that new hospital is at last delivered to the people of Worcestershire.

Some of the most worrying dogma in the Queen's Speech relates to education. In common with my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Mr. Merchant), I should like to refer particularly to the assisted places scheme. It is right that I should declare a limited interest, because both my children attend schools that award assisted places, although they are not beneficiaries of them.

When I knocked on doors during the election campaign, I was struck by the extraordinarily large number of people whose children were in receipt of assisted places. As my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham has said, such parents come from ordinary backgrounds. We are not talking about rich kids getting an unfair subsidy at the expense of poor deprived children in inner-city areas. Those children come from less well-off families who, for one reason or another, have concluded that the education offered at an independent school is appropriate for their children. I see no reason why that perfectly legitimate choice should be denied to those parents.

[Mr. Peter Luff]

The parrot cry we get from the Labour party is that the assisted places scheme subsidises private schools. That is absolute nonsense. They will survive perfectly comfortably without the assisted places scheme, but they will lose some of that cultural diversity and mix of socio-economic backgrounds that make them more vibrant and less elitist. I bitterly regret the fact that, because of the Labour party's dogmatic assertion that that scheme is equivalent to a subsidy to such schools, we will lose that scheme.

Four schools in my area of Worcestershire benefit from assisted places. Two of them were state schools—the Worcester Royal grammar school, and King's school, which is direct grant. They became independent because they did not want to go comprehensive. Most of the children at those schools would otherwise have been educated at the state's expense, but many parents have found the resources to send their children to those schools because the schools have maintained their reputation for excellence. The fact that quite a large number of children attend Worcester Royal grammar school on assisted places is something that we should welcome, because the scheme has maintained access to that school for children from less well-off backgrounds. I am absolutely delighted about that, particularly because those four schools are the only ones in that part of Worcestershire that offer sixth forms. Those who live near Worcester who want to send their children to a sixth form must opt for the private independent sector. Under the state system, one is forced into the tertiary sector, which many parents do not like. I, too, prefer sixth forms in schools.

The assisted places scheme has extended choice and broken down barriers. To me, that is entirely in line with the spirit that the Prime Minister seems to wish to claim that he has set before the British people both in the manifesto on which he won the election and in the Gracious Speech. I am extremely surprised at his insistence on pursuing the dogmatic policy to abolish assisted places.

As for the arithmetic behind the abolition of the assisted places scheme and the pledge to reduce class sizes in primary schools, I would be tempted to describe that with an unparliamentary word. You would call me to account, Mr. Deputy Speaker, if I used the word that I would like to use. I do not know whether you will allow me to say that it is deliberately misleading—that expression may also be a little tendentious and I may have to withdraw it, but that is what I feel about the estimate.

The abolition of the assisted places scheme will save a pittance. In one respect, I am glad that it is to be phased out over seven years, but that means that the pittance that it does save will become available only very slowly. The estimate that I heard my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition use yesterday was that an extra £250 million would be required to meet the pledge on primary school sizes. That is a huge sum of money over and above the money from the abolition of the assisted places scheme.

I was intrigued by the arithmetic of the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman) when he made his remarks yesterday—and *Hansard* has done him an even greater injustice. According to *Hansard*, he says that £2,250 million will go to assisted places at three

schools in his constituency, benefiting 95 of his constituents. If that were right, it would mean that the figure per child would be £23.7 million, so that is probably not the figure. I think that he said that £2.25 million would benefit 95 children. Unless my calculator has let me down, that means £23,700 per child. I do not believe that figure either, because I am not aware of any schools in the country that charge £23,700 per year—£13,000 is a pretty healthy whack to pay for a private school, and schools in Worcester charge a fraction of that.

I suspect that the right hon. Gentleman has got his figures wrong by an order of magnitude and the cost per child of the assisted places scheme in his constituency is in the order of £2,300. That fact is important because, according to figures provided by the Audit Commission, the 1995-96 figure for spending per secondary school pupil in metropolitan council areas averages £2,194—so it will save about £100 per child on average. The figures for expenditure in Manchester show that it spends above the average. It is difficult to tell from the table what the exact amount is, but it is probably about £2,300 or £2,400. Therefore, if the figures are right, the abolition of the assisted places scheme in Manchester could cost the people of Manchester money because the children who would have replaced pupils with assisted places in later years will not be able to afford to go to those independent schools; they will return to the state sector, where they will have to be paid for at that rate. Therefore, the policy could cost money, not save money, in Manchester.

Savings around the country will be very modest—negligible even. The average cost of the assisted places scheme, including the most expensive schools, is only £3,800 per pupil. We are therefore looking at small savings to fuel a regrettable sense of dogma on the part of the Labour party.

That same label of dogma applies to the abolition of the nursery voucher scheme. It is a difficult subject; I fully agree that the policy has not had the effect intended, but that is no fault of the previous Government. It is the fault of county councils up and down the country that have set about amending their entrance policies to schools deliberately to ensure that they can maximise their revenue from the nursery voucher scheme at the cost of the pre-school playgroups and the private nursery schools. They have sought to shuffle off the blame on to the Government in a very skilful public relations exercise mounted by the burgeoning PR departments of Labour and Liberal Democrat-controlled county councils. It will not do.

I understand that in Wandsworth, where there is a Conservative-controlled local education authority, pre-school playgroup provision has increased since the introduction of nursery vouchers. The authority was determined to use the scheme to produce choice and diversity. Here we see the true Labour colours: an absolute obsession with obtaining a monopoly of state provision for public services. That is what the Labour party wants and that is what it seeks to achieve.

I fully admit that the Conservative party underestimated the passionate desire of Labour and Liberal Democrat politicians to get their hands on the monopoly of public provision. We underestimated the deviousness that they would use to squeeze the pre-school playgroups out of

existence, so perhaps we must bear a share of the blame for the tragedy that is unfolding in too many areas of the country.

I visited several pre-school playgroups in Mid-Worcestershire and watched the difficulties that they face. But I blame no one but the politicians at county hall: it is they who set out on this mischievous path. I sincerely hope that the Government can be persuaded to think again about nursery vouchers. The Government should not abolish them, but should encourage Labour colleagues who run the local education authorities to use the vouchers constructively to produce the choice and diversity that parents want.

Yesterday, we heard the Prime Minister's traditional claim that education was his priority. Why has he not been saying that to the Labour local education authorities the length and breadth of the country? It is they who bear the heavy burden of blame for failure, particularly in our inner-city areas. It is no coincidence that Islington comes at the bottom of the pile and is the worst of all the local education authorities. We know the Prime Minister's response to that problem for his own family. I do not blame him for doing what he did; he made the right decision, faced with the appalling disaster that is Islington's education. But it is the Labour party's fault that education is so bad in Islington. It is a cheek for the Labour party, having failed so many generations of children, now to say that education is its priority. I suppose that one should rejoice over a death-bed conversion—that at last the Labour party has seen the light—but it is a bit late when so many children have paid the price for the Labour party's failure.

Another example of dogma guiding education policy in the Queen's Speech is the effective abolition of grant-maintained schools. There are weasel words about developing

"a new role for local education authorities and parents" and establishing

"a new framework for the decentralised and equitable organisation of schools".

Those are wonderful words, but what do they actually mean? They mean taking power away from parents, governors and teachers and giving them to politicians and bureaucrats instead. In the process, funding for grant-maintained schools such as Flyford Flavell first school in my area or Prince Henry's high school will be cut. That is a scandal and I urge the Government to think again.

I have one final point, on a more optimistic note, to make on education. The Gracious Speech mentions the review of higher education that Sir Ron Dearing has been conducting. I have high hopes for that review in relation to dance and drama students, but I understand from talking to the Under-Secretary of State for National Heritage, the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, Central (Mr. Fisher), that I may be disappointed. I hope that the Government will look in detail at the Dearing review and consider the future for the funding of higher education, which is a difficult issue for any Government to grapple with. The Labour party has been more honest about the problems that they will face over this issue than it has been over other matters. If the Dearing report does not deal with the problems of dance and drama students who rely on discretionary awards from their local education

authorities to receive the training they deserve, I hope that the Government will set up their own review to address the problem.

Dance and drama students have received a better deal now thanks to lobbying by myself and others. I pay particular tribute to Iain Sproat, the former Minister of State at the Department of National Heritage, who did so much work to drive the policy forward. We now have a three-year interim scheme of which some local education authorities are taking advantage. Unless there is a more whole-hearted review of dance and drama training and its funding, I fear that we will lose a generation of dancers and actors; that will have huge implications for our theatrical life, our cultural life and our economy. Dancers and actors make a vital contribution to this country's economy, particularly tourism. I hope that the funding of dance and drama training will feature in the Government's programme if the Dearing report does not deal with the matter effectively.

I have talked for longer than I intended, for which I apologise, but I feel passionately about the errors, faults and dogma of the Queen's Speech. I am deeply depressed to see the Government pressing ahead in such a mean-minded way on so many fronts. Other issues concern me that are equally dogmatic and worrying, for example the break-up of the United Kingdom, which is threatened by the constitutional measures contained within the Queen's Speech. It is interesting to note that the hon. Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) has just entered the Chamber—the West Lothian question remains unanswered after all these years. On this subject, the Queen's Speech shows a dogmatic pursuit of something that will damage this country. That is what I see in the Queen's Speech, which is not what I hoped for. It is not a one-nation speech, but a dangerous speech. We Conservatives must fight it all the way.

7.58 pm

Mr. Tony McNulty (Harrow, East): First, I thank the people of Harrow, East for returning me as their Member of Parliament. I start my first speech in the Chamber with a hint of sadness. I should not be here this evening; I should be in the civic centre in Harrow carrying out the happy task of proposing a fellow Labour councillor to be the first Labour mayor of Harrow for some time. That meeting has, sadly, had to be cancelled because, yesterday morning, the incumbent mayor of Harrow, Councillor Alan Hamlin, an Independent Ratepayer, was found dead. We have therefore had to cancel the annual council meeting as a mark of respect. It is, therefore, with a hint of sadness that I rise to make my maiden speech tonight.

Councillor Hamlin was a councillor in Harrow—as I said, as an Independent Ratepayer—for close on 20 years and he had a profound interest, both professionally and politically, in education. It is therefore appropriate that that subject will be the dominant theme of my maiden speech. He will be sadly missed, both by my constituents and by his own.

Not only because it is traditional, but because I would choose to do so anyway, I want to pay some respect to the former Member of Parliament for Harrow, East, my predecessor Mr. Hugh Dykes. He served Harrow, East and its predecessor seats for some 27 years and did so in a hard-working fashion, with the interests of his constituents uppermost in his mind. He put forth his views

[Mr. Tony McNulty]

in a forthright manner and I am bound to say that he was neither the most enthusiastic, nor perhaps the most comfortable, Government Back Benchers over the past 18 years. He probably sees much that he would commend to the House, were he here, in the current Queen's Speech. He probably finds more in it to support than he found in Queen's Speeches during his 18 years as a Government Back Benchers under the Conservatives. I reiterate that I wish him all the best in future and repeat my sincere tribute to him. It is not often that one gets a chance to pay tribute to 27 years of public service. Whether for our party or for other parties, such service is worthy of respect.

I should also like to pay tribute to Roy Roebuck, who was Member of Parliament for Harrow, East from 1966 to 1970. I hear, although I have not spoken to Roy recently, that he was as surprised to find himself in the 1966 intake as many of the 1997 Labour intake are. A gentleman called Mr. Skinnard represented Labour in Harrow as part of the 1945 landslide, and I want to pay tribute to him as well.

I am sure the House will understand if I stop paying tribute to my predecessors at that point. One has to go back to 1924 to find the previous Labour Member of Parliament for what was then the urban district of Harrow: that gentleman spent about six months on the Labour Benches before toddling off to found his own various parties. He ended up in the British Union of Fascists, so I shall not pay tribute to Oswald Mosley as one of my predecessors as a Labour Member of Parliament, albeit a temporary one, for the seat of Harrow.

Harrow, East consists of many areas such as Wealdstone, Harrow Weald, Kenton and Stanmore, as well as Harrow town centre. I shall certainly be reminding the House of those areas in years to come. It contains a rich and diverse ethnic mixture and has significant Asian, Irish and Jewish communities, all of whose vibrancy and social and cultural life I shall seek to enjoy far more in the years to come than I have done until now. The people of those communities will welcome all that is in the Queen's Speech, especially the emphasis on education.

Harrow has—and this is not a complacent remark—excellent schools. By any criteria, even value-added, Harrow has consistently emerged as one of the most effective and best performing local education authorities in the country. It has that reputation for excellent performance because of a cross-party wedding to the notion and ethos of comprehensive education. Harrow is, without doubt, the best comprehensive local education authority in the country.

Any authority that has beaten Harrow in any measure of performance has done so with swathes of grant-maintained, independent and other types of school. Harrow has but one small Catholic high school that has opted out; all the rest have stayed within the fold. Harrow has excellent first and middle schools, excellent high schools and a vibrant Catholic sector. Next year, we welcome the first Jewish first and middle school in the area, which reflects the needs of that community. During my time in the House I shall do all I can to represent the interests of all those schools as effectively as possible.

Sadly, the notion of comprehensive education and the cross-party nature of the support for it ended this year. It takes no skin off my nose to pay tribute to previous

Conservative administrations on Harrow council and to the hung council that continued until this year for their cross-party support for education. Indeed, on at least two or three occasions in recent years, councils such as Wandsworth, which are run by groups more right wing than the Conservative group in Harrow ever was, have chastised Harrow council for not pulling its finger out, getting more schools to opt out and going even further down the road of voluntary contracting out and other such policies. I happily pay tribute to Harrow Conservatives, Liberal Democrats and Labour representatives for, until this year, sharing a cross-party vision of education.

I say until this year because, this year, the Liberal Democrats decided that, whatever noises their party was making nationally about putting a penny on this and a penny on that to pay for education, they thought it appropriate locally to slash some £6 million off the education budget, which was already well overstretched. The consequences are unfolding at this very moment as we approach the end of the school year, with compulsory redundancies among teachers and severe difficulties for all the schools.

As I said, the people of Harrow, East will welcome the emphasis on education in the Queen's Speech. Although our schools are effective and successful, more than 32 per cent. of our five, six and seven-year-olds are still taught in classes of significantly more than 30. Even if it is dogmatic, we should make no apologies for shifting resources from the privileged few on assisted places to the many. That is especially welcome—it is certainly long overdue.

Measures to raise standards are also welcome. The education community wants an end to what might be described as the mindless rhetoric of the blame and shame culture that has developed in recent years, whereby children's successes are ridiculed and their failures condemned in hopelessly simplistic terms and our teachers are at best patronised and at worst—and all too often—demonised. The education community in Harrow, East and everywhere else wants to work within a robust, critical but supportive partnership with the new Government in their plan to raise and sustain standards and energise the teaching profession. The education community welcomes an end to the demonisation of the teaching profession and the recognition of its integrity and its will to work with the Government to improve both standards and effectiveness.

Local education authorities, including Harrow, will be pleased to be afforded a new and stronger role in education. They will also welcome the clarification of their role and the review and development of specific plans and targets. It is absolutely right that the Government look to LEAs as the key agency to secure improvements in the standards and effectiveness of our schools by working with our schools—not, as Conservative Members have said, by unleashing the town or county hall bureaucrats. LEAs, working with the Government and all those involved in education, can sustain the drive for higher targets and achievement in education. LEAs can offer support, challenges and assistance to schools and the Government as all work together in a consensual partnership to secure higher standards.

However, LEAs will also recognise that, with some enhancement of their power and responsibilities, comes public accountability. It is right that LEAs should be

reviewed and held to account. Some LEAs already recognise that; others are learning to do so. Work on LEA review has already been carried out in areas such as Kirklees and Staffordshire. Although those attempts are modest and require much more development, they represent steps in the right direction. The Association of Chief Education Officers is developing a framework for external review that should inform the Government's own work on that part of the second education Bill, to the benefit of all concerned.

At the root of the Queen's Speech is the idea that all the key players should work together with a degree of vision and direction so as to increase effectiveness and improve standards. Let us have a full review of local education authorities and their development plans within a robust, fair and supportive framework. Equally, let us have some clarity about the roles that the Office for Standards in Education and the Audit Commission will play in that review process. I believe that the Audit Commission has far more experience of such review processes, a better track record and perhaps greater integrity. It should lead those processes rather than Ofsted because Ofsted's experience is wholly different.

We should also evaluate the relationship between externally moderated reviews on a statutory basis and the continuing internal review processes which more advanced local education authorities have already carried out. As public bodies, LEAs can and, I believe, will, in the spirit of partnership, welcome such scrutiny and will, to cite a popular phrase, recognise that with the crown come the thorns—that an enhanced role brings with it enhanced responsibilities for which the LEA will be held to account. If it fails, and thus fails our children, the Government have made it clear that they will not hesitate to intervene directly. I am sure, however, that the Government will spell out clearly what is expected of LEAs and the mechanisms by which they will be held to account before any intervention by hit squads or Government teams. Responsibility is without doubt a two-way street.

Equally, the education community in Harrow, East will welcome the developing notion of a fresh start for failing schools, but I issue a word of warning—let us assess the current situation and not isolate any school, failing or otherwise, for immediate closure and fresh start treatment. Let us first work with all those in the education community to put in place the criteria for measuring any lack of effectiveness and to establish some clarity in the definition of schools that need fresh starts, of which there are undoubtedly a number.

The last thing that anyone working in education needs is lack of clarity, hobnail boots and precipitate action born of an absence of criteria and evidence. That was the approach taken by the Conservatives when they were in power. I know that the Government will not introduce any education measures in that way or indulge in cheap political stunts that impinge on children's education, as the previous Government did so readily. This will be a Government for education and we will remember above all that we are here to serve and build consensus among all those involved in the provision of education because we owe our children no less.

My constituents will also look forward to developing policy on post-16 provision and to a positive response to proposals outlined by Dearing as significant numbers of young people in Harrow, East go on to further and higher

education. Education matters to my constituents, and pupils, teachers, head teachers and parents will be delighted that the Government have emphasised from the very start that education is a key priority. Education must matter for all our futures. For this Government, education will matter because pupils matter. The education community will welcome the shift from empty rhetoric to focused action and policies that will work and which involve the professionals who seek to do so much for our children.

The people of Harrow, East will welcome the commitment to a referendum on a directly elected authority for London. My constituency has a significant Irish population and we shall therefore welcome the commitment in the Gracious Speech to finding a real and lasting peace in Northern Ireland. I have family and friends throughout Ireland and roots in County Donegal, so I share that welcome and wish the Government well in their endeavours.

Finally, I say thank you again to the people of Harrow, East for the privilege of being elected to the august position of their Member of Parliament. I shall represent them as best I can. I shall certainly attempt to be in the House for at least as long as my predecessor and ensure that Harrow, East enjoys all the benefits of a radical, reforming new Labour Government who care for people and put them first. We are indeed the servants, not the masters.

Although over the past six weeks I have grown to detest the song, I really believe that from now on, things can only get better. I look forward to playing a full role in the Government's legislative programme and fully support the proposals outlined in the Queen's Speech. We shall never become as complacent or detached from people as the previous Government did, or become as bloated with arrogance and indifference as they did over the past 18 years—and, indeed, as they have shown themselves to be in defeat.

I look forward to serving my constituents well in the next five years. One way to do that is fully to support the education proposals in the Queen's Speech—my constituents will expect no less. I must emphasise what a pleasure it will be to support from the Back Benches a Government who have ensured that politics matter again because, as the Queen's Speech shows, for this Government people matter again.

8.14 pm

Mr. Alan Hurst (Braintree): I believe that it is the tradition to compliment an hon. Member on making his maiden speech. This is in effect a double maiden, but I nevertheless compliment my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow, East (Mr. McNulty) on a speech which is sure to overshadow mine. I studied it with great interest to see whether I could pick up on certain points.

I am proud to represent the county division of Braintree in Essex. At one time, my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay) was the sole Labour Member for the county of Essex, but we have multiplied that figure a number of times—I believe that there are now six of us.

It is not only a matter of tradition but a personal wish that I pay tribute to my predecessor, Tony Newton, the former Leader of the House. Hon. Members will not be surprised to learn that he was very highly regarded in the constituency or that the election campaign in Braintree

[Mr. Alan Hurst]

was clean and straightforward. I shall certainly convey to my constituents the fact that Tony Newton was clearly held in high regard in the House. He served the constituency for 23 years. It is some consolation to me that, when he was first elected in 1974, he had a smaller majority than I have. For various reasons, not least his own effort, he increased that majority to 17,000 at one point. I therefore look with hope to the future.

I must also mention some other previous illustrious representatives of the Braintree division. One who will spring to the mind of older Members is Mr. Tom Driberg, who represented the division between 1942 and 1955 when it was joined with Maldon. Of course, he was first elected in a wartime by-election as an Independent. Come the 1945 election, he was given the choice—in the Maldon Labour hall, I believe—of taking the Labour ticket or not. Tom Driberg took the obvious course. He took the Labour candidature and went on to represent the constituency for a further 10 years. To this day, he is remembered in virtually every small hamlet and nook and cranny of what is a widespread division, even though it is some 42 years since he represented the constituency.

Another name that I must mention is that of Sir Valentine Crittall, who had the honour of being the first Essex Labour Member of Parliament elected outside the London area since 1923. His name is linked with window frames; his family firm was a major industry in the constituency, especially in the model village of Silver End.

It may come as a surprise to hon. Members that I mention a Mr. R. A. Butler, who represented two villages in my division, Earls Colne and Gosfield. Conservative Members will remember that he twice failed to become the leader of the Conservative party. I fear that he might have had just as much difficulty in doing so were he here today. However, Mr. Butler is still well regarded by Labour voters in that part of the constituency, even after such a long time.

For hon. Members who are not familiar with real Essex—central and north Essex—I should point out that the constituency of Braintree includes not only the town of Braintree, which would be good enough in itself, but Witham and Bocking. They are mediaeval wool towns. The area is surrounded by approximately 40 villages and hamlets of various sizes—Kelvedon and Coggeshall are among the larger, while Rotten End is a mere hamlet with only a few residents.

Industry provided the backbone of the towns of Braintree and Bocking, which were surrounded by agriculture. It is tragic to see the changes that have occurred since 30 or 40 years ago; old photographs show the market squares of those towns full of men and women coming home from work. Full employment was universally understood in those days to be a normal part of our system. In my constituency, we have lost many major employers, some of which will be familiar even to those who do not know my part of Essex well: Coulthard, Lake and Elliott, Hunt and Crittall. All these have either vanished or been reduced to shadows of their former selves. It is easy to imagine the effects on local employment, especially when one bears in mind the fact that employment on the land has also been in decline. Agriculture was still a major employer in the constituency as recently as 25 or 30 years ago.

This explains why my constituents are most interested in the new Government's welfare-to-work proposals. Indeed, the logical centrepiece of our whole programme is welfare to work. We have heard Conservative Members today discussing the perceived inequities of taxing the profits of the public utilities, but I can assure them that my constituents will welcome the money being channelled into employment and training—initially for young people, but I trust that in the longer term the programme will generate wider successes.

I want to end on a local matter. I am sure that my constituents will have been encouraged to hear of the review of hospital provision in London, and to read the report that appeared in *The Guardian* today which stated that large, centralised hospitals are not necessarily the answer to medical need. It may already be too late; we may have already passed midnight—I make no reference here to darkness—but I would ask those responsible for health to consider Black Notley hospital. It may not be at the forefront of their minds at present, but that hospital outside Braintree has a long history and has been greatly valued in the constituency. The health authority has scheduled it for closure, and planning permission has been obtained, as so often happens I am sorry to say, to redevelop the site for gain. The priority seems to be selling houses as opposed to providing local facilities.

I hope that, even at this late stage, some consideration may be given to maintaining medical facilities at the site, to serve not just the town of Braintree, but the surrounding villages.

I know that my constituents will overwhelmingly commend all parts of the Government's programme. I am very proud and pleased to be their Member of Parliament at this great moment in our nation's history, and to serve and support the new Government.

8.22 pm

Mr. Stephen Dorrell (Charnwood): I begin by congratulating you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, on your election to your post. I look forward to being able to address the House on a number of future occasions under your auspices.

One thing strikes me immediately as I rise to wind up this debate on education, employment and the national health service. The Prime Minister has made great virtue of the fact that new Labour Members have been sent to this place to work. Quite a few of them seem, however, to have gone home to dinner this evening. I find it surprising on the first main day of the Queen's Speech debate that there should be such difficulty keeping the debate going to fill the allotted time. Clearly, more than 200 new Labour Members this evening have preferred to eat new Labour dinners than to come here and debate education, which the Prime Minister regards as his first priority, and employment, which I would expect to be a major priority in the constituencies of all those absent 200 new Labour Members. There is also the matter of health, my former ministerial responsibility; I would have expected them to want to voice their concerns about the NHS.

I have also been struck by how much Labour Members have concentrated on the record of the former Government. Almost every Labour speech has mentioned the shortcomings of that Government. If this were really the radical Government that the Prime Minister claims,

Labour Members would have risen today to enthuse about a genuinely radical programme, explaining to the House, their constituents and the country how new Labour's ideas will change the lives of their constituents.

Yet almost all the Labour speeches we have heard today have failed to mention how the Government's ideas will change the country. Instead, they have given us a tired litany of perceived difficulties after 18 years of Conservative government.

Despite these general criticisms, I do want to congratulate those who have made their maiden speeches on their fluency and presentational skills. Perhaps we should not be surprised by those attributes. New Labour Members have led us to come to expect fluency and presentational skills. Still, almost all of them paid gracious tributes to their predecessors.

There cannot be many maiden speakers who can refer to two predecessors as distinguished as Tony Newton and Rab Butler, who were mentioned by the hon. Member for Braintree (Mr. Hurst). Tony Newton was a sad loss to our side. When I was first elected, in 1979, his was the friendly face that met me as the representative of the Whips Office. He was my delegated Whip who tried, not always successfully, to keep me on the straight and narrow. Between 1979 and 1997, he developed a reputation second to none in this House as an effective constituency Member and as a friend of the House of Commons. He loved this place and understood its workings. Every member of the Conservative Government came to respect him as someone who could persuade us that we really did agree even though we usually came to meetings thinking that we did not. We shall be the poorer without him.

Rab Butler was a key figure in Conservative history—one whom my party would do well to heed as it squares up to the challenges that it faces over the next few years.

The hon. Member for Shipley (Mr. Leslie) probably imagined that his colleagues would be able to keep this debate going until 9 o'clock—a perfectly reasonable assumption—so I do not criticise him for being absent. He spoke graciously of Sir Marcus Fox, who was a distinguished parliamentarian and another sad loss to the Conservative Benches. I understand that the hon. Member for Shipley is the youngest or almost the youngest Member of the House. In that, he follows in my footsteps—I was the youngest Member in the 1979 Parliament, but I was 27 when elected, so I was an old man compared with the 24-year-old elected in Shipley. He developed his argument clearly and fluently and I am sure that the House will hear more from him in the years ahead.

The hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Mrs. Stuart) paid a gracious tribute to her predecessor, Dame Jill Knight. All the Conservative Members who heard it will have been grateful for that.

I enjoyed the speech of the hon. Member for Norwich, South (Mr. Clarke). I particularly welcomed his unambiguous support for the private finance initiative and the hospital building project in Norwich. Given his background on a wing of the Labour party that would not in its time have been regarded as new Labour, the hon. Gentleman's endorsement in his maiden speech of an idea that was at the heart of so much of what the previous Government sought to do is a striking testament to the way in which the Conservative party has dominated the intellectual tide of the 1980s and 1990s.

The hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Mr. Turner) also paid a gracious tribute to Sir Andrew Bowden, who was not only a hard-working constituency Member of Parliament, but a man who developed a wide range of friends and admirers among those interested in the affairs of pensioners. He will also be sadly missed in the House of Commons.

The hon. Member for High Peak (Mr. Levitt) paid a gracious tribute to Charles Hendry. I have no doubt that Charles will soon be back in this place, resuming a career for which he was clearly well equipped. He served his constituents with distinction and I look forward to his return to this place. He is, as my hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Worcestershire (Mr. Luff) said, a distinguished and articulate representative of one-nation Conservatism.

The hon. Member for Harrow, East (Mr. McNulty) paid tribute to his predecessor, Hugh Dykes. Hugh and I go back a long time. Throughout his time in the House of Commons, he remained a friend of mine, even if that was not immediately obvious from some of our public comments on his constituency concerns. I am sure that the new Secretary of State for Health will have further exchanges with his hon. Friends representing Harrow and surrounding constituencies. I look forward to watching the unfolding of that issue and the relationships between the Secretary of State and his hon. Friends.

I congratulate you, too, Mr. Deputy Speaker—as you have just changed places with another new Deputy Speaker—on your election to an important and distinguished post in our affairs.

I have told the new Secretary of State for Health privately and I repeat publicly that he comes to one of the best jobs in the Government. Conservative Members will watch with great care the way in which the right hon. Gentleman and his ministerial colleagues discharge their responsibilities. We are as committed as I do not doubt that he is to the principle on which the national health service was founded—that health care should be available to the people of this country on the basis of clinical need without regard to their ability to pay. That is the simple but powerful idea on which the national health service was built. The Conservative party, like the Labour party, is committed to that. We shall watch how he turns that idea into practice. Day by day, week by week, month by month, we shall be watching to see that under his stewardship the national health service delivers on the commitment for which it was established.

I do not detract from my welcome to the right hon. Gentleman when I observe that his appointment came as a little bit of a surprise. During the general election campaign, when I was debating with the health spokesmen from the other parties, I offered the Liberal Democrat spokesman a small wager on whether the new Secretary of State for National Heritage would assume the health brief if the Labour party won the election. The Liberal Democrat spokesman replied, "No bet." I thought that that was an interesting comment on the way in which the issue of health played out in the dying days of the last Parliament.

The new Secretary of State is the fourth Labour health spokesman whom I have faced in less than two years as the leader for the Conservatives on health issues. [Laughter.] The leader for the Conservatives on health issues.

[Mr. Stephen Dorrell]

The first of those spokesmen was the current President of the Board of Trade. In an unguarded remark to a newspaper reporter, she let slip that the traditional national health service was undermanaged.

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr. Frank Dobson): And so it was.

Mr. Dorrell: That is an interesting recognition from the right hon. Gentleman. On the strength of her piercing insight into the managerial skills of the traditional health service, the right hon. Lady was transferred and given responsibility for the whole of British industry and commerce. It is clearly easy to impress with one's understanding of managerial strength. She departed quite soon after I became Secretary of State for Health.

The second spokesman whom I faced was the present Secretary of State for Social Security. It is fair to say that she suffered from no such blinding flash of inspiration when she was looking at the history of the national health service. She, after all, was a member of the health team who argued during the 1987 Parliament that the establishment of local management of trusts was "a monumental irrelevance". She said that there was no demand among Britain's general practitioners for the establishment of fundholding—words that she had to eat when it became clear that more than half of them demanded fundholding status. At a meeting that we both attended she proudly described the private finance initiative as the privatisation initiative. We had better introduce her to the hon. Member for Norwich, South, who seems to have disappeared again. I would be pleased to organise a tutorial by the hon. Gentleman, with his old Labour background, so that he can ensure that the Secretary of State for Social Security properly understands the benefits of the private finance initiative and the fact that it has nothing to do with privatisation.

I remember the right hon. Lady, during her time as health spokesman, being responsible for what was best described as a high-octane whinge. For me, she summed up new Labour. She was dressed by the hon. Member for Stevenage (Ms Follett), coached by the hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson), and educated at the best schools—schools that the Government want to deny to children whose parents cannot afford to pay the fees. She was a new label on an old and bitter vintage.

The right hon. Lady moved on to apply—*[Interruption.]* I am waiting for the hon. Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay) to rise to his feet to defend the new Secretary of State for Social Security.

Mr. Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): I have been very patient and have not intervened yet in this Parliament. It occurs to me to ask what the devil all this claptrap has to do with the Gracious Speech. We should be talking about the Government's programme, not the dress sense and style of people who have served on the Opposition Benches and who now form an important part of the new Government.

Mr. Dorrell: The hon. Gentleman ought to arrange an appointment with the hon. Member for Stevenage. I suspect that not all my hon. Friends are aware that she

was responsible for the Follettisation of the Labour party. We shall no doubt hear from her about how the hon. Gentleman can improve his presentation skills.

The present Secretary of State for Social Security moved on to apply her forensic skills to the problems that had baffled my right hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr. Lilley), the previous Secretary of State. We look forward to seeing how she finds her way through that particular jungle. She was replaced as Labour's health spokesperson by the present Secretary of State for National Heritage, the right hon. Member for Islington, South and Finsbury (Mr. Smith).

When the right hon. Gentleman arrived, he announced to the world that he had been tasked with forming a health policy for the Labour party. I thought that that was a trifle ungallant as a way in which to refer to his predecessor. It was, however, perfectly true that his apparent commitment to draw up a health policy for his party was at least novel. I have good news for the new Secretary of State for Health. The right hon. Member for Islington, South and Finsbury did not tie his hands with anything that need constrain his options in terms of health policy.

The present Secretary of State for National Heritage held the health brief for the Labour party for roughly nine months. It is not unfair to say that the future historian of the national health service will not devote a whole chapter to the evolution of health policy under the Secretary of State for Health's predecessor.

It is more likely that the right hon. Member for Islington, South and Finsbury will be remembered for the judgment passed on his efforts by the *Health Service Journal*. It said:

"At the last election, the Natural Law Party proposed to improve the health of the nation through yogic flying. Mr. Smith's plan to levitate standards in the NHS by cutting 'bureaucracy and red tape' shows a similar lack of concern for cause and effect wrapped up in mumbo-jumbo... Mr. Smith is too bright, and Mr. Blair too astute, surely, to believe all this."

The right hon. Member for Islington, South and Finsbury came to health to provide a policy and his epitaph is that what he left behind was yogic flying dressed up in mumbo-jumbo. That point brings us to the new Secretary of State.

The right hon. Gentleman is not an altogether convincing face of new Labour. I do not think that he would present himself as being the authentic voice of the changed Labour party. He comes with attitudes aplenty and prejudices aplenty—all of them on the record. As yet, his hands have not been much tied by policy.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Mr. Paul Boateng): Get on with it.

Mr. Dorrell: I now propose to satisfy the Under-Secretary of State. He is not yet a right hon. Member, but no doubt he will be before long. I propose to move on to deal with some of the aspects of policy to which Labour's health team now have to address their minds.

Mr. Boateng: It is about time.

Mr. Dorrell: It is about time that they did so; that is right. They were in opposition for 18 years without a

health policy and now they have to develop one. It is about time, to use the words of the Under-Secretary of State. That is absolutely right.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): While the right hon. Gentleman is giving advice to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, what advice would he give on the serious problem of the Human Tissue Act 1961? With his experience as the previous Secretary of State for Health, what advice would he give on a kidney donor and organ opt-out proposal of the kind that I and others were constantly suggesting during the previous Parliament, both to him and to the hon. Member for Orpington (Mr. Horam)? On reflection, might he not have had a more benign attitude towards the matter?

Mr. Dorrell: The hon. Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) raises an important point, which reveals the difficulties in each proposed way forward. We sought to ensure that where there was a demand for tissue to be transplanted, there were proper safeguards, but that the tissue was available with those safeguards being observed. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will pursue the subject with his Government with the same enthusiasm that he did with my hon. Friend the Member for Orpington (Mr. Horam) and me. Frankly, the problems in that area do not get any easier because there has been a change of Government. I would be happy to engage in a detailed discussion on the matter either with the hon. Gentleman or with the Secretary of State for Health.

I now turn to the health issues that the Government have brought forward in the Queen's Speech. First, they have committed themselves to introducing legislation to allow the private finance initiative to go ahead and to clarify the legal position of trusts entering PFI contracts. I welcome the fact that they are introducing that legislation. I think that the Secretary of State will confirm that there was a Bill in his top left-hand drawer, as it were, when he took office on 2 or 3 May. If the new Bill is essentially the Bill that was agreed before the election, I welcome the fact that he is proceeding apace with that measure.

I ask the Secretary of State when he addresses the House to clarify what exactly his policy is on the use of private finance projects to deliver clinical support services where there is consent and agreement among the local clinicians about the use of the private sector. There was an article in the *Financial Times* on 14 May which reported:

"Radiology and pathology may continue to be open to private finance deals in the National Health Service."

It said, however, that when a Minister was asked whether that was true or false, he said,

"We will have to wait and see . . . It remained a grey area."

I think that that is true; it is a grey area.

It is important that the Government maintain a degree of flexibility on the issue, but that was not the line taken by the right hon. Member for Islington, South and Finsbury in the election campaign; nor was it the line taken by the present Prime Minister during the election campaign. Both of them criticised the PFI project at the Sheffield Royal Hallamshire hospital precisely on the ground that it recognised that there was a grey area around some of the clinical support services. It would be nice to hear from the Secretary of State that some of the rhetoric in the election campaign on that issue was wrong. If he

will not recognise that, will he disown his unnamed Minister who was talking to Nick Timmins in yesterday's *Financial Times*?

While we are talking about the capital programme, I hope that the Secretary of State can clarify another point which relates to the position of London hospitals. Labour has clearly committed itself to a moratorium on the process of change in London's hospitals. I think that that is a step backwards because it will inhibit the process of change and the process of commissioning new facilities within London's health service. More important from the point of view of the House is that we need to know from the Government what kind of review it will be.

When the previous Government set up a review of London's hospitals, it was headed by Sir Bernard Tomlinson. It was a total review of all the options which looked at bed availability, each specialty in London in detail and the implications of the proposed changes for the research programme of the national health service. It made it clear that it wanted to listen to the views not just of the big battalions within the health service, but of the health authorities and of the general practitioners. It wanted to apply a proper priority to the development of primary care within the health service and it took three years to deliver its conclusions.

I do not ask the Secretary of State immediately to recognise that all the conclusions of that process were right, but I do ask him to recognise that a review process that took three years to produce its conclusions is unlikely to be supplanted convincingly by a review headed by a Minister of State which has been given seven months to produce the answer. Especially it will not be convincing when the Secretary of State has already ruled out one possible conclusion of the review. He was reported in the *Evening Standard* as saying:

"This Government will not end up endorsing the previous Government's policy".

I do not ask the right hon. Gentleman to endorse the previous Government's policy, but I do ask him not to set up a review and then to rule out potential conclusions before the review has even started.

Mr. Dobson: Surely there would be no point in having a review if we were satisfied with the lunatic situation in which the previous Government placed the London health service.

Mr. Dorrell: Surely a review looks at the evidence and comes out with a conclusion based on that evidence. How can the Secretary of State expect us to have confidence in a review when he has already ruled out one of the potential conclusions? That is the question that he must answer. He has in fact obstructed the process of change in London's hospitals and he has set up a half-cocked review which will not carry conviction because it will not have the time to look at the evidence that is necessary to assess the issue in detail.

Let us go on to the other questions about the Government's health policy that remain unanswered. Do the Government propose a major management upheaval in the national health service? That should not be a difficult question to answer. Does the hon. Member for Thurrock want a major health service management upheaval?

[Mr. Dorrell]

[*Interruption.*] The hon. Gentleman is the only Labour Member who has been willing to express an opinion, so I am encouraging him to do so again.

Mr. Mackinlay: I support my right hon. Friend.

Mr. Dorrell: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his capacity to get the line right. He did not even need to look at his teleprompter to work that out. He conducted a review in five minutes and now he supports the right hon. Gentleman.

For months, the Labour party has spoken with forked tongue on the issue. It says in one breath that it supports the purchaser-provider system and in the next it promises to end the internal market. Last Friday, the right hon. Gentleman went to Leeds to speak to staff at the NHS headquarters there. I applaud him for that. He promised them no major upheaval in the health service. How is that consistent with the abolition of the internal market—a commitment in the Labour manifesto and in the Queen's Speech?

Either we shall have a fundamental change in the running of the health service, in which case the right hon. Gentleman cannot go to Leeds and say that there will be no upheaval, or we shall not. If there is to be no change, we shall continue with the internal market and the purchaser-provider system—the two phrases have exactly the same meaning—that was established by the previous Government in the 1991 legislation.

The Secretary of State is unfortunate in that his three predecessors sat firmly on the fence. Within the next few weeks, he will have to come off the fence because he is committed to producing a White Paper. He will have to tell the national health service, the House and the British people what the Labour Government mean. Do they mean fundamental change or do they propose making a few cosmetic changes and changing a few brass plaques, but basically accepting the system that they have inherited?

An absolutely crucial part of the question whether the Government are going for reform is what they plan to do for GP fundholders. Will they or will they not allow individual primary care practices to continue to operate national health service budgets? Will they continue to allow the system of practice-based budgets to operate? As the Secretary of State will know, I never made it a compulsory system but it was an option available to GPs who felt that it was in the interests of their national health service patients. Will the right hon. Gentleman continue to leave that option available? That is another question that he will not be able to fudge.

Either the doctors will be able to decide what is best for their patients or they will become mere consultees and the right to decide will be shifted from the doctors to the bureaucrats. The right hon. Gentleman will have to decide whether he wants the doctors to decide or whether he wants another tier of bureaucracy in the health service; commissioning, as his predecessor called it. He will have to decide whether he wants to transfer the power from the doctors to the commissioning bureaucrats.

The Labour party loves bashing bureaucrats in the health service but the Labour Government will not be able to continue simply bashing bureaucrats. They will have to develop a policy. The acid test will be whether they prefer doctors or bureaucrats to decide.

That is one of the much wider questions raised by a number of measures in the Queen's Speech. In the national health service the threat is clear. It is that power will be taken from doctors and given to a new tier of bureaucracy. Incidentally, plenty of people within the Labour party will advise the Secretary of State against that course of action. I quote the most recent article by a Labour supporter endorsing fundholding as a key part of a flexible, patient-led health service. Mr. Dick Sorajbi, who until recently was an adviser to the Home Secretary, wrote:

"Fundholding has created an explosion of initiatives in health care . . . This should have been a Labour policy. It puts primary care before secondary care. It is more publicly accountable because citizens can put more pressure on their GP than on a health authority quango."

That was written by a new Labour adviser. I want to hear whether the right hon. Gentleman accepts that advice from his own party or whether he prefers to put his faith in bureaucrats within the health service. If he prefers to put his faith in bureaucrats, he will be applying the same policy in the health service as the Secretary of State for Education and Employment is applying in the education service. It is a consistent theme there, too. There will be less power for schools, governors, and heads. All the power will be concentrated in the local education authority, which will decide not merely the distribution of schools, but the type of schools, and the distribution of pupils. Management vested in the local education authority is the policy which the Secretary of State for Education and Employment has made it clear that he will pursue.

That is a key difference between the approach of the new Government and that of the Conservative Opposition. The Government continue to believe that the way to deliver good public services is to empower well-meaning bureaucrats. We have 50 years of experience to demonstrate that that model does not work, but despite all the evidence, they continue to believe that that is how to deliver a well-run public service.

Our approach in government was different and our approach in opposition will continue to be different. We shall continue to argue that the way to make public services responsible and accountable to the people they serve is to give parents and patients real choice and to give those responsible for managing the services the opportunity and the responsibility to develop those services and to respond to the choice of the people who use them.

Our policy in education, in health and across the whole public sector was to break up impermeable bureaucracies because they are unresponsive and do not deliver high-quality services to the people who rely on them. We shall fight any plans that the Government introduce to recreate bureaucracies that block progress in the public services.

That is not the only theme that runs through the Queen's Speech. In his opening speech, my right hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden identified another key theme and my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant) made much of it in his remarks. The Queen's Speech is full of unexceptional sentiments and fraudulent arithmetic. In the national health service, the Government say that they will deliver shorter waiting lists, but that it will not cost any money. In schools, they promise to deliver smaller classes and say that the money

will come from abolishing the assisted places scheme. The fact that no money will come from the assisted places scheme for several years and that all the independent analysis of their proposals says that their arithmetic does not add up continues simply to be brushed aside.

Sooner or later, the Secretary of State for Health and his right hon. Friends will have to get their calculators out. They will have to work out how much the various commitments that they are making will cost. We are told that the commitment on education will cost £250 million. The growth in resources that the right hon. Gentleman needs simply to meet his commitments to increase costs in the health service—never mind treat more patients—will add several hundred million pounds to his budget.

Is the Secretary of State still committed to the abolition of compulsory competitive tendering in the NHS? We never got a straight answer to that. Has he calculated—or asked one of his junior Ministers to calculate—how much the minimum wage will cost the NHS? The Labour manifesto commits the Government to the abolition of the efficiency index in the NHS. In the arithmetic of the last public expenditure survey round, that saved us £527 million. Is the right hon. Gentleman going to throw that to the winds? Where is the money going to come from to deliver all the specific and individual spending commitments?

Worst of all, of course, is Labour's commitment on the assisted places scheme, which is not only bad arithmetic but bad social policy. I simply do not understand how a party that seeks to steal the one-nation epithet can move on to seek to close the doors of schools to children of parents who cannot afford to pay the fees. In my former constituency of Loughborough there is a grammar school that was founded during the reign of King Henry VII. Instead of laughing, the Secretary of State should explain to the present generation of Loughburians why, if they cannot afford the fees, he thinks that it is good social policy to deny them the opportunity that has been given to every generation of Loughburians for the past 500 years. Why does he take pride in introducing that new division in our society? Let him explain that.

Mr. Dobson: If the right hon. Gentleman is so confident that the people of Loughborough object to our policy, why did he go on the chicken run to get away from the constituency? He clearly made the right judgment because Loughborough is now represented by a Labour Member of Parliament.

Mr. Dorrell: The right hon. Gentleman has no answer to the question.

The Queen's Speech reflects the Labour party's election campaign. As my hon. Friend the Member for Hertsmer (Mr. Clappison) made clear, the election campaign was made simply of soundbites. It left all the difficult questions unanswered. Labour held out the promise of smaller classes, shorter waiting lists, lower youth unemployment and welfare to work—all soundbites that we have heard until we have become bored of hearing them. The arithmetic to support those commitments was sketched at best on the back of a matchbox.

Even worse, Labour made other commitments in the Queen's Speech, such as extra local authority spending, and extra spending on social security because it does not have the guts to reform the social security system in the way in which my right hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden planned.

The truth is that the Government continue to float glibly over all the real issues that confront them. They have deliberately stoked up expectations that cannot be met. The task of an Opposition is to call them to account as people get angry and become disillusioned when those expectations are not satisfied. The Government come to office uniquely well packaged and uniquely badly prepared. As the gentle mist of early morning gives way to the relentless heat of the midday sun, the carefully worked soundbites will be seen to be thin gruel indeed. To those on the Government Benches I say this: enjoy the cheers while they last because they will turn soon enough to tears. For new Labour it will indeed be never again glad confident morn.

9.2 pm

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr. Frank Dobson): I congratulate you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, on your appointment—or election, I am not quite sure which—as Chairman of Ways and Means. I think that we voted unanimously for you, so if anyone objects to your rulings you should remind them that we did so.

Many maiden speeches of all shapes and sizes have been made today. It would be worth while if Opposition Members—even those on the Front Bench who assert what they are going to do and tell the House what is going to happen as though they had a majority—would bear in mind the constituencies represented by Labour Members who have made their maiden speeches: such as those of Shipley, of Brighton, Kempton, of High Peak and of Braintree. Before Opposition Members read us lectures, they might contemplate why maiden speeches have been made by Labour Members who represent such places.

I shall now refer to some of those speeches. Those people who made maiden speeches displayed awesome confidence and competence. I hope that my new hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Mr. Leslie) will not follow in the footsteps of his predecessor and become chairman of the Tory 1922 Committee. Whenever there was a crisis in the House, Marcus Fox ran round like the Tory party answer to Jonesy in "Dad's Army" shouting, "Don't panic," although he always appeared to be leading the panic. My hon. Friend is fortunate to become the hon. Member for Shipley, which includes Saltaire, a distinguished place that is good to look at. When people compliment him on his youth, he should remember that at 24 he is still a year older than Pitt was when he became Prime Minister.

My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Mrs. Stuart) rightly pointed out that her seat has been represented for 43 years by women, including the redoubtable Jill Knight. My hon. Friend brings to the House a wide knowledge of pensioners' problems and of pension law. I am sure that we shall draw on that knowledge, especially those of us who do not pretend to be on top of the subject of pensions and benefits.

My hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Kempton (Mr. Turner) mentioned the need—in Brighton—for low-cost housing and the promotion of equal opportunities in health. I hope that he will be happy with the Queen's Speech and with what I have to say tonight.

The next maiden speech was from my hon. and good Friend the Member for Norwich, South (Mr. Clarke), who succeeded one of my closest friends in the House, John Garrett, who sadly had to retire because of the

[Mr. Frank Dobson]

temporary—I hope—state of his health. My hon. Friend welcomed the private finance initiative partnership and I shall return to that subject. As with so many issues in today's society, the Tories claim credit for an initiative that they originally opposed. Public-private partnerships fall into that category, as I will explain later.

My hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Mr. Levitt) rightly claimed credit for his work in supporting the restoration of trade union rights at GCHQ. Today's statement and policy change are a credit to the new Government and will restore civil liberties that were roughly and unpleasantly set aside by the present Government—[*Interruption.*] I mean the previous Government; I will get it right eventually. I confess to the House that when I arrived in the former Secretary of State's office on the Saturday after the election and was given a pile of briefings by the civil servants, I was puzzled by the apparent common sense of what the briefings called "Government policy". It was only after I had read the third one that I realised that "the Government" meant us.

The next maiden speech was from my new hon. Friend the Member for Harrow, East (Mr. McNulty). When most people think of Harrow, they think of education or at least of one particular educational institution—Harrow school. My hon. Friend pointed out that whatever the state of that publicly subsidised institution, the state of the schools in the rest of Harrow leaves much to be desired. Something needs to be done.

My extremely confident new hon. Friend the Member for Braintree (Mr. Hurst) rightly paid tribute to several of his predecessors. I join with others in saying that he was right to pay tribute to his immediate predecessor, Tony Newton, who is a decent man. I have never known whether the following story about Tony is true, but he is such a decent man that it may be. When he discovered that his official driver did not like driving on the motorway, the arrangement was that at the motorway slip road Tony got in the driver's seat and the driver got in the back. Whether it is true or not, the story is entirely in character with that very decent man.

My hon. Friend referred to a health institution at Black Notley. If anything comes in about it, I shall refer it to one of my hon. Friends to deal with. I happen to know, however, that Black Notley is rather a nice place, so perhaps I could go there.

There were two other maiden speeches tonight, in a sense. I am making one of them—my first speech from the Government side of the House and from the Government Front Bench. The former Secretary of State made his maiden speech from the Opposition Front Bench. So far as I can make out, he had a reasonable reputation in the Department. I do not think that I am giving away any secrets. At the worst, he was regarded, if I may sloganise, as better than Bottomley, but of course that is not the highest praise in the history of the world.

I shall not indulge in many reference to points made by the would-be Leader of the Opposition this evening, but in relation to the health service his claim that the Tories were the breakers-up of bureaucracy took the biscuit. We had expected some recantation from those on the Opposition Benches, but they are apparently into denial. That breaker of bureaucracy presided over a health service

which ended up with 20,000 extra bureaucrats and 50,000 fewer nurses. [HON. MEMBERS: "Rubbish."] If that statement is rubbish, it is based on figures supplied by the Department of Health when it was in the control of Tory Ministers. I accept no responsibility for their accuracy or otherwise. [*Interruption.*] The figures were supplied by the right hon. Gentleman's Department to my predecessors who at the time were leading for Labour on health. If he objects to the use of them, he should have corrected them at the time.

Labour Members, old and new, will understand my feelings when I say how honoured I am to have been invited by the Prime Minister to become the Labour Secretary of State for Health and so to have ministerial responsibility for the national health service, which was founded by our party in the teeth of opposition from the Conservatives and which has served the British people so well for almost 50 years.

The NHS was founded on the principle that the best health services should be available to all. That basic principle of fairness explains why the NHS and the dedicated people who work in it are so dear to the hearts of all decent and right-thinking people in our country. The basic fairness of the health service goes with the grain. It matches the basic fairness of our people. They cherish a health system based on the commitment to provide people with top-quality treatment because they need it—not because they are rich or influential, not because they happen to live in a particular place or go to a particular doctor, but because they need it. The best health services should be available to all. Quality and equality have been the slogans of democratic socialists since democratic socialism commenced.

Those treasured principles of fairness, quality and equality have been breached under the outgoing Government. The changes that they made have created a two-tier system which is unfair to patients and repugnant to doctors who have to impose the unfairness, and is costing a fortune in bureaucracy, invoices and red tape. We will get rid of it. We will get rid of the internal market. That is what we promised the British people at the general election, and we have already made a start at keeping that promise.

On the Saturday on which the Cabinet was appointed, I set in train arrangements to tackle two-tierism and to make sure that non-fundholder patients do not suffer the disadvantages that they have been suffering up to now. The arrangements will streamline the system, tackle the paperchase and cut the flow of invoices. They will reduce management costs and release money instead for treating patients. As we promised in our manifesto, we shall divert the millions saved on bureaucracy to the treatment of patients and, in particular, to cut waiting times for cancer treatment. That is certainly needed, because at the moment 78,000 people admitted for cancer treatment have waited more than a month for that treatment, and nearly 2,500 have waited more than three months.

We intend to change the fundholding system, with all its associated unfairness and bureaucracy. We shall replace it with local commissioning, in which general practitioners and other primary care professionals can work together to help plan local services and arrange for local hospitals to meet local needs. Most people working in the NHS share our criticisms of the existing system and our wish to change it for the better. But we must all recognise that after 18 years of Tory government—

18 years of almost constant upheaval and 18 years of change for the sake of change—most people in the NHS do not want another round of ill-thought-out, untried and untested reorganisation. They want something better than that, they deserve something better than that, and they will get it from this Government.

All over the country, forward-looking people in the NHS are trying to develop new and better models than fundholding—modern arrangements, designed to provide top-quality treatment to meet local needs in the real world. Those models are based not on the half-baked theories of overpaid management consultants, but on the principle of fairness and on a commitment to top-quality services. They draw on the day-to-day experience of the real needs of real patients.

Mr. Dorrell: The Secretary of State has described the development of a wide range of different forms of purchasing in the health service, much of it led by primary care producers. That is fine. But my simple question is whether he will continue to allow those who wish to run budgets at a practice level the option of doing so. Will that option remain available?

Mr. Dobson: All will become clear as my speech proceeds. [HON. MEMBERS: "Answer the question."] I will answer the question if Opposition Members wait a moment. [Interruption.] The right hon. Member for Charnwood (Mr. Dorrell) made his speech, and I will make mine—that is the arrangement in this House.

While we are reducing the excessive costs of the current system, we shall encourage more pilot schemes for local commissioning, building on what is already happening. We shall allow pilot schemes to show what they can and cannot do and we shall then assess which schemes work best. Then, and only then, will we move to change the structure of the NHS to start introducing new arrangements across the country. That will guarantee that our proposals for change will have been literally tried and tested before they are applied generally. They will embody the principles of fairness and equality and will not, as the Tories did, take chances with the lives and health of patients. Nor will they ignore the views, experience and professional knowledge of the dedicated staff of the NHS.

Mr. Dorrell: I am simply seeking a yes or no answer to this question: will the option of managing a budget at practice level remain? The Secretary of State has said that other options will be developed, and no one could object to that. I simply want to know whether the option of practice-based budgets will remain—yes or no?

Mr. Dobson: It seems likely—but not certain—that in the light of our experience in assessing the pilot schemes the fundholding basis will disappear because I hope that most doctors—[Interruption.] The right hon. Member for Charnwood was in charge of the NHS for two or three years. We have inherited a poisoned chalice in which 37 out of 100 health authorities were in deficit at the end of last year and 111 out of 425 trusts were in debt at the end of the year. Waiting lists are going up; waiting times are going up.

Mr. Dorrell rose—

Mr. Dobson: No, I will not give way. Waiting times are going up. Doctors tell me that there is a shortage of

doctors, and nurses tell me that there is a shortage of nurses. The right hon. Gentleman thinks that it is fine for him to ask questions about what may be happening in 18 months or two years. What I am saying to him, if he will just listen, is that I would expect that fundholding would disappear, but the test must be what works. We shall see whether the pilot schemes work. In the end, we shall have to decide what works and take responsibility for it, but I can tell the right hon. Gentleman that the people whom I have been meeting over the past few days—most of whom he has met—appear to be satisfied with our approach to the future of the health service, because most of them are sick to death of the health service as it is currently being operated.

Mr. Dorrell: The right hon. Gentleman said that he thought that fundholding would disappear. I then asked him who would decide, and he said that he would decide. Does that mean that, if a doctor believes that it is in the interests of his national health service patients for his practice to continue to run its budget, the right hon. Gentleman will decide that that option is to be removed?

Mr. Dobson: As the right hon. Gentleman knows, I am not one of those who try to get out of responsibility, and I do not expect to. I am saying that, ultimately, responsibility for all this will lie with the Secretary of State. The final decisions will have to be made, and I am saying that I expect that in the end that option will disappear. I repeat, however, that we are genuine when we say that we want pilot schemes, and we want to see how those schemes work. We want them to be allowed to run long enough for us to make an evidence-based assessment of how they work; then, in consultation with all concerned, we shall have to make the final decisions. That, as I understand it, is what being in government involves.

I know that many decisions that should have been made by the former Secretary of State over the past year have been left to us to try to sort out. The right hon. Gentleman mentioned some of them earlier. In the meantime, we shall get on with building more hospitals. The last Government, led in this area by the former Secretary of State, talked a lot about putting private finance into hospital building: they talked a lot, but they did not do a lot. Tonight, the right hon. Gentleman claimed credit for the idea of public-private partnerships.

My memory goes back sufficiently far for me to remember when those speaking from this Dispatch Box treated with total contempt the proposals for public-private partnerships that my right hon. Friend the present Deputy Prime Minister advanced in relation to transport. After four or five years in which the transport industries were deprived of capital, the Government finally got around to seeing some merit in, at least, the theory of public-private partnerships, but their record in promoting such partnerships is pathetic. They have obstructed more than they have achieved. Compared with the excellent record of many Labour local authorities in promoting public-private partnerships, the Government's record is a disgrace—[Interruption.] I mean the previous Government's record.

We shall introduce a short Bill to clear up any doubts about the powers of NHS trusts to enter into private finance initiative arrangements to help provide much-needed hospitals. That keeps a promise that we

[Mr. Dobson]

made in the general election campaign. We also promised not to extend private finance to include clinical services, and we shall keep that promise.

The Queen's Speech fulfils another promise: we shall change the law to prohibit tobacco advertising. Smoking is the largest single preventable killer of people in this country: at least one in every five deaths is caused by smoking. The Tories did nothing about it because they are in the pockets of the tobacco barons, but we are not. We shall publish a White Paper spelling out a concerted programme to reduce tobacco consumption using every possible lever available to the Government: changes in the law, taxation, education and publicity.

At the same time, we shall publish a draft Bill to ban tobacco advertising. It will cover all forms of tobacco advertising, including sponsorship. We recognise that some sports are heavily dependent on tobacco sponsorship and, as we do not want to harm those sports, we shall give them time and help to reduce their dependency on tobacco and to replace it with sponsorship from more benign sources. We do not want to harm those sports, but they must recognise that by helping to promote tobacco sales they are harming the health of many of their spectators and viewers.

I hope that during the discussions on the White Paper and on the draft Bill we shall be spared the fatuous claims by the tobacco industry that its advertising is not designed to promote sales. The fact is that the tobacco industry, uniquely among industries, kills about 120,000 of its own customers every year, so it has to recruit another 120,000 new smokers every year to its ranks to make up for that year's casualties. Of course tobacco advertising is intended to promote sales.

The programme to reduce smoking, and therefore to reduce smoking-related disease and death, is part of our fundamental commitment to improving the nation's health. We have already carried out our manifesto commitment to appoint a Minister with responsibility for public health, but our commitment does not end there. As we all know, some illness is unavoidable: it can strike suddenly out of a blue sky. Some illness is caused by people's life styles—smoking or drinking too much or, as in my case, eating too much—while some is caused by the harmful conditions in which many people are forced to live and work.

As a society, we must try to help the victims of unavoidable illness. That is what the health service does. We should offer advice, help and inducements to people to choose a healthy life style. We must also act together to combat the innumerable causes of ill health and injury that spring from the conditions in which people are forced to live and work.

Under Labour, every Government Department will be charged with the task of contributing its share to improving the nation's health. We are committed to a root-and-branch attack on the factors that systematically make our people ill. That includes factors which harm us all, such as air pollution or problems with food—we shall reduce air pollution and introduce a food standards agency—as well as factors which bear down most heavily on the worst-off: homelessness, unemployment, low wages, poverty, crime and disorder.

All those things are awful in themselves, but that is not all: they are the main sources of gross inequalities in health. Poor people, homeless people, jobless people and badly paid people are ill more often and die sooner. That is the greatest inequality of them all: there is no greater inequality than the difference between being alive and being dead. We intend to tackle those inequalities.

Other measures announced in the Queen's Speech will contribute to tackling those inequalities. Homelessness and bad housing produce intolerable conditions. Labour's housing policy is based on the belief that every family should have somewhere decent and affordable to live. A decent, secure home is vital to family life: without it, a family's health suffers, grown-ups find it hard to hold down a job and children find it hard to do well at school. How can they do homework if they have no home to do it in?

Without a proper home, family relationships are soured and family breakdown becomes more likely. Without a proper home, life is vile. Many of our fellow citizens do not have decent homes. Several thousand families spent last night living in bed-and-breakfast accommodation, which does not provide a proper home. Bed-and-breakfast accommodation is vile.

A medical report on the problems of living in such accommodation states:

"Even if hotel accommodation is in good order it is rarely appropriate to the needs of young children."

This is an official report, and therefore has a mastery of understatement. It continues:

"It is difficult to maintain hygiene while washing, eating and sleeping in one overcrowded room. High levels of gastro-enteritis, skin disorders and chest infections have been reported. Kitchen facilities are often absent or inadequate. So people are forced to rely on food from cafes and take-aways which is expensive and may be nutritionally unsatisfactory. The stress of hotel life undermines parents' relationships with each other and their children. Normal child development is impaired through lack of space for safe play and exploration. High rates of accidents to children have been reported, probably due to a combination of lack of space and hazards such as kettles at floor level"

in the room where the family are trying to live.

A further report emphasises the problem, stating:

"Risk to health in bed and breakfast is well above that of the domiciled population. These risks stem from shared, or lack of, amenities, overcrowding and unsafe properties. Infection, accidents, malnutrition, sleep disturbances, low birth weight babies, eating problems, behavioural problems, depression and even death can result".

Those circumstances apply tonight to several thousand of our fellow citizens in towns and cities up and down the country. That is a disgrace and we intend to bring it to an end. That is why our manifesto contained the common sense promise to allow councils to invest the takings from the sale of council houses to provide new and improved homes for people with nowhere decent to live.

Mr. Fabricant: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Dobson: I will if it is necessary.

Mr. Fabricant: It is always necessary. What will the right hon. Gentleman do about councils, including Labour councils, that possess empty council houses?

Mr. Dobson: Get them to fill them. That idea works reasonably well.

Let us take London as an example. I think that there are 26,000 officially homeless families in London. Last year, under the previous benighted Government, not one council house was built. That had nothing to do with local government; it was because the Government prevented councils from doing it. I am convinced that when we keep our promise it will be good for the families concerned and will improve their health.

I shall give one example. When improvements were made to the Holly street housing estate in Hackney, there was a 33 per cent. fall in demand for both general practitioner and hospital services. It is good for the people and it pays off.

Mr. Dorrell: Can the right hon. Gentleman confirm that Hackney has no capital receipts? His example does not relate to capital receipts at all. Hackney does not have the resources to do what he is talking about.

Mr. Dobson: My point about Hackney was that it was an example of where improvements to housing had led to an immediate direct fall in the demands that people placed on local health services because their health had improved. The building of new and improved homes all over the country will be of immense benefit. We will make sure that it happens all over the country.

Mr. Dorrell: The right hon. Gentleman has just made an important commitment. Is he committing the Government to machinery for translating capital receipts from one part of the country to another? If so, what arrangements will be made to compensate authorities that lose their capital receipts? How will the machinery work? The right hon. Gentleman has just made an important announcement. He is Secretary of State now; he cannot stand at the Dispatch Box and commit the Government to machinery when he does not have the vaguest notion of how it will work, especially as it is not in the Department of Health's sphere of responsibility.

Mr. Dobson: I repeat exactly what I said when I was shadow Secretary of State for the Environment: except in the fantasies of the Tory party, we have never had any proposals to transfer capital receipts from one part of the country to another. [HON. MEMBERS: "You just said it."] I did not say that at all. As the right hon. Member for Charnwood knows, I said that there will be a house-building programme; it will apply in all parts of the country, and in those parts of the country where capital receipts are available it will be financed from the capital receipts. Is that plain, straightforward and simple, or do I need to explain it again? I will explain it again if the right hon. Gentleman wishes.

Our proposal to get 250,000 young people off the dole queues and into work will improve their health. They certainly need it. That Secretary of State is responsible for all sorts of—[HON. MEMBERS: "You are the Secretary of State."] I got the tense wrong. That ex-Secretary of State was responsible for producing all sorts of statistics. He should have looked at the mortality of young men. Although mortality in general has declined this century, the mortality of young men has risen over the past few years. If people are asked why, they associate it, at least partly, with joblessness and the lack of hope that goes with it, as well as with the problems that follow.

That is why it is absolutely right to take money from the privatised utilities and transfer it, to get 250,000 young people back to work. Tory Members bleat on about how difficult it will be for the privatised utilities. Let me remind them of one lot of figures relating to the water industry. Since it was privatised, the water industry has made profits of £10.5 billion. It has distributed dividends of £3.5 billion and, during that time, under the arrangements made by the benighted Government who have just rightly gone out of office, the industry paid not a single penny in mainstream corporation tax. The Government who privatised the water industry gave it huge sums and took no tax from it. The industry is in for a surprise. Actually, it is not in for a surprise because it has known about our windfall tax for the past four years, but it is certainly in for some taxation.

Many people who are in work are so badly paid that they cannot afford decent shelter, clothes, food or heating, so they are more likely to fall ill. Measures in the Queen's Speech and the forthcoming Budget will help them. We shall introduce a national minimum wage to lift working people out of poverty so that they can afford better clothes, food and heating. We shall also reduce the cost of heating by reducing VAT on fuel. The national minimum wage will help to reduce the £4 billion which taxpayers must contribute towards benefits that make up, at least in part, for the low wages paid by the worst employers. Above all, it will mean that many of the worst-off will be ill less often and will die later in life than they would otherwise have done. I should have hoped that the right hon. Member for Charnwood would wish that to happen.

Mr. Dorrell: The right hon. Gentleman will be preparing his spending bids for the public expenditure survey. I presume that he will include an estimate for the cost to the national health service of the Government's minimum wage commitment. What will that estimate be? How much does the right hon. Gentleman intend to write into the health service budgets for 1998–99 to cover the cost of the minimum wage?

Mr. Dobson: I must say that I regard that as an abject plea of guilty. The Secretary of State is saying—[*Interruption.*] The former Secretary of State is saying that after 18 years of presiding over the health service he is proudly proclaiming that a lot of people working in it are on poverty wages. He is the one who has the explaining to do, not me. All the changes—[HON. MEMBERS: "How much will it cost?"] How many people are on poverty pay in the NHS? I am happy to give way to the right hon. Gentleman to hear the answer.

Mr. Dorrell: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman. He is the Secretary of State and he has just made a commitment to introduce a minimum wage. Presumably he intends to do that during the course of 1998–99. That will have a cost to taxpayers and I believe that taxpayers are entitled to know how much the right hon. Gentleman's policy will cost them.

Mr. Dobson: Until the Secretary of State tells me how many people are on—[*Interruption.*] I will get it right eventually; I understand that the Paymaster General can distinguish between us, and that is quite important to me.

Mr. Fabricant rose—

Mr. Dobson: No, I will not give way. I do not think that wigs are available on the NHS yet.

[Mr. Dobson]

All those changes will apply wherever poor housing, high unemployment and low wages occur. As we all know, some parts of our towns and cities—and for that matter some rural areas, which are now represented by Labour Members for the first time in a long while—contain dense concentrations of poor housing, low wages and high unemployment. As a result, those areas have generally poor standards of health. We intend to take concerted action to improve those areas. That will involve partnerships between central and local government, business and voluntary organisations designed, first, to stop the rot and then to start to put things right. The NHS will be at the heart of those efforts to treat ill health and promote good health.

Our election manifesto also committed us to make sure that the appointed boards that control health authorities and trusts should become more representative of the communities that they serve. I can tell the House that arrangements have already been made to ensure that that change applies to all future appointments, including the round of posts up for renewal from 1 November.

The new Labour Government intend to tackle the root causes of ill health and inequalities in health. We intend to restore and improve the national health service so that it can provide the best health services to all who need them. We shall therefore do away with the internal market that has proved unfair and wasteful. We shall use pilot schemes to develop alternative means of organising local services which draw on the local knowledge, skills and experience of the staff involved.

Under Labour the NHS will be a public service which belongs to the people of this country and which commands their support. We want to ensure that the NHS deserves the loyalty and commitment of those who provide the services: the people on whom we all depend—the people whom the Labour Government will allow to get on with their jobs.

I should like to finish on a personal note. I hope that I shall never find myself at this Dispatch Box claiming personal credit for any improvements or good performance in the NHS. To the best of my knowledge, no Minister of the Crown has ever treated the sick, comforted the dying or tried to comfort grieving relatives: all of that is done on our behalf and on behalf of the people of this country by almost a million dedicated, hard-working people. Whatever arguments we may have across the Floor of the House, I hope that we can agree that we owe it to them to ensure that they can do the jobs which they have set their lives to do and on which we all depend.

Debate adjourned.—[Ms Bridget Prentice.]

Debate to be resumed tomorrow.

Hospital Care (Swindon)

Motion made, and Question proposed. That this House do now adjourn.—[Ms Bridget Prentice.]

9.44 pm

Mr. Michael Wills (North Swindon): I am grateful to Madam Speaker for allowing me the opportunity to introduce this Adjournment debate. I am particularly grateful that I have been able to combine it with making my maiden speech. I understand that most Members of Parliament do not adopt this method of introducing themselves to the House, but the subject is one of deep and immediate concern to my constituents, and I am grateful to have been given the opportunity to raise it without delay.

My constituents, like so many others, have suffered from the operation of a two-tier system in the health service. They will have been delighted to hear my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State's plans to replace that system with a fairer and better one. There is a particular crisis with hospital care in the Swindon area and an urgent need for Government action to solve it. It is because of the importance of the issue to the people of Swindon that, with permission, I should like to give up half the time allocated to me in this debate to my hon. Friend the Member for South Swindon (Ms Drown), whose constituents share my constituents' concern and who has worked so tirelessly on their behalf.

Two weeks ago the voters of North Swindon granted me the privilege of representing them in the House. The new constituency takes in under one parliamentary roof many different communities. It takes in most of the northern area of the town of Swindon itself; it encompasses the historic market towns of Highworth and Cricklade; and it embraces the Wiltshire villages of Castle Eaton, Marston Meysey, Stanton Fitzwarren, Latton, Hannington and Blunsdon.

In the previous Parliament, the area covered by the constituency was represented by three Members of Parliament, two of whom are no longer in the House. I should like to take this opportunity to thank them for all their work over the years on behalf of the people of North Swindon. Those people know well the extent of the debt that they owe to Simon Coombs, Richard Needham and the right hon. Member for Devizes (Mr. Ancram).

The Swindon area is known nationally as one of the economic successes of the past two decades, but there has been nothing inevitable about that. It was built on its great railway works; when they declined and were eventually shut down in the 1980s, Swindon could have become a ghost town, but it did not. It reinvented itself. The talents, adaptability and hard work of its people, supported by an active partnership between business and the local Labour authority, have made Swindon one of the fastest growing economies in the country.

Today, Swindon business represents a cross-section of excellence in our economy. My constituents work in state-of-the-art manufacturing companies such as Rover, Honda and GEC-Plessey. They work in companies at the cutting edge of technology such as Motorola and Intel; they work in prominent financial services firms such as Allied Dunbar and the Nationwide building society; they work in distribution services for high street names such as Woolworths and W. H. Smith; and they work in many other firms that lead their fields.

Those firms need a continuing supply of highly skilled and motivated people to build on their successes. They are the firms that will recognise the importance of this Government's commitment to upgrading skills and enabling everyone to continue to upgrade their skills throughout their working lives. My constituents recognise the opportunities that will be offered to them.

Swindon sets a vibrant and inspiring standard for what working people can achieve for themselves, when given the right support by the community. For all its successes, the Swindon area has been dominated by a problem over the past few months. It is that problem which is the subject of this debate. In other circumstances, I should like to say much more to the House about the remarkable constituency that I am privileged to represent, but I hope that the House will understand if I focus on the subject of the debate: the crisis in hospital care in the Swindon area.

Economic growth and population growth are often close companions, and Swindon is no exception. Its population is growing three times faster than the national average, and the numbers of the very young and the old are growing at a particularly fast rate. It is those groups which have special recourse to hospital services. Yet as need has grown in the Swindon area, provision has shrunk.

Last year, the RAF hospital at Wroughton, the much loved Princess Alexandra hospital, where one in 10 of the Swindon population were born, was closed as part of the Conservative Government's defence review. That was a bad decision, taken in haste and repented ever since by the armed services and by Swindon alike. On its own, that would have caused problems enough. Overnight, a valve that relieved the pressure on the national health service at times of peak demand was removed. The closure of that hospital added 6 per cent. to the work load of the NHS Princess Margaret hospital.

That is not all. Princess Margaret hospital itself desperately needs renewal. There is a £28 million maintenance backlog, which increases with every month that goes by. A full business case for the renewal of the hospital was submitted to the Treasury two years ago, but the Conservative Government's insistence that it should be tested under the private finance initiative has meant that still no decision has been reached. We are told that plans are well advanced and that the trust is close to signing a new deal for a new hospital under the private finance initiative; but what we are not told is when exactly that deal will be closed. No matter how often we ask, we are not told and neither have we been told the details of that imminent deal. Those things are precisely what the people of North Swindon need to be told.

Delay in providing new hospital facilities has left the area relying on old and increasingly inadequate ones. Since 1994, wards at Princess Margaret hospital have been closed three times because of infections—a problem that could have been avoided had appropriate isolation facilities been available. On one occasion, an operating theatre had to be closed because air conditioning backfired, spraying a sterile theatre with droplets of dirty water. Old and inflexible structures have helped to push up waiting lists for in-patients by up to 40 per cent. in the past two years. Patients have had to be bussed to hospitals as far away as Birmingham and Southampton. Delay increases anxiety among patients and their relatives and in the community at large. Delay demoralises staff; delay is one big problem.

Lack of adequate information about the proposed deal under the private finance initiative is another big problem, and we definitely need information in order to feel reassured about the deal in North Swindon. The feeling is spreading that the plans for the new hospital have been driven, not primarily by clinical need, but by the need to meet the commercial objectives of the private sector partners in the private finance initiative. It is feared that, to meet commercially driven targets, patient throughput will be speeded up by up to 10 per cent., even if that is not always clinically appropriate and leaves other health care providers to pick up the pieces.

There is now growing local concern among professionals and lay people alike that, even if they can be implemented quickly, current plans will not solve the present crisis, but will merely institutionalise it. It is feared that an integrated approach to health provision in the area has been precluded by the priority that has been given under the private finance initiative to commercial, rather than clinical, objectives. To avoid fragmentation of provision, any replacement of Princess Margaret hospital must clearly involve appropriate co-operation between the trust, the health authority, the GPs, the community health council representing the users of the health service and the local authority.

In January, Princess Margaret hospital had to cancel all non-life-threatening operations. Forty beds have been closed for much of this spring because of the difficulty in recruiting and keeping staff to work in the deteriorating physical environment at Princess Margaret hospital, which the hospital itself acknowledges. All the staff at the hospital have been working to the highest standard of their profession and beyond to cope with the mounting pressures on them. Everyone is grateful to them, but they cannot continue in that fashion indefinitely. They and everyone else in North Swindon need to see some glimmer of hope for the future.

Of course, the closure of Princess Alexandra RAF hospital, the delays in renewing Princess Margaret hospital and the continuing question mark over the plans for the new hospital are not the only reasons for Swindon's hospital problems. No one in Swindon expects a guarantee that there will never again be any problems with their hospital care, but the people of Swindon do expect some recognition of the seriousness of the problems that they face. They do expect some real and effective action to be taken to tackle the problems. That is precisely what they never got from the previous Government.

Swindon deserves better, so I ask my hon. Friend the Minister to reassure the people of North Swindon on three points: first, that if Princess Margaret hospital is renewed under a private-public partnership, the clinical needs of patients will be paramount; secondly, that the decision on any new hospital facilities will be taken in the context of co-operation between primary, secondary and community care providers in the area to ensure the best possible care for patients; and thirdly, that any obstacles to an immediate decision on the renewal of Princess Margaret hospital will be removed.

During my time in the House, I intend to work to ensure that my constituency continues to prosper and thrive and that there will be fulfilling jobs for all who want them. I shall work to ensure that all my constituents are given an equal opportunity to succeed, to reach for their dreams without being held back by the accident of who they are

[Mr. Michael Wills]

or where they were born. I shall work to ensure that they all have equal access to the best possible health care and education, because such equality is the hallmark of a decent and civilised society. I want all my constituents to be able to grow old with dignity and all that that entails. However, as vital as those tasks will be during my years in the House, nothing is more immediately pressing for my constituents than the plight of their hospital.

Since 1 May—Labour day—there has been a new mood in the country, a palpable sense of a fresh start. I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister can tonight assure us that there will be a fresh start for Swindon's hospital care.

9.55 pm

Ms Julia Drown (South Swindon): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Swindon (Mr. Wills) for allowing me to contribute to the debate on Swindon's hospital care. I congratulate him on securing this debate so early in the Session.

This is my first speech in the House and I should like to say that it is an honour to be the first Member of Parliament to represent the people of South Swindon. The old Swindon constituency has been split in two—my constituency takes part of the former Swindon seat and a small part of the old Devizes constituency.

I pay tribute to the work of my predecessors. Mr. Simon Coombs greatly enjoyed his 14 years in the House. He answered thousands of letters from his constituents and helped hundreds of people. He was a keen supporter of some of the town's important activities, such as our football team and the local choral society.

I follow in the footsteps of David Stoddart, who was the Member of Parliament for Swindon from 1970 to 1983 and who is now in the other place. It is an interesting coincidence that he also made his maiden speech within a day of the new Parliament beginning. I am proud to follow him in that respect.

I am delighted to be the first woman to represent Swindon in Parliament. This election saw a sea-change in the number of women in Parliament, and I am pleased to be part of that change. We will make Parliament a better place. I was a health service professional for 11 years and now bring my skills to the House. I should like to use my experience of health service finance for the good of Swindon's health and for the good of the health service across the nation.

Swindon is a great town. We have some of the best leisure facilities in the country; we have one of the best local authority collections of modern art; and we have access to wonderful green areas, within the town and in the rural parts of my constituency. We have an active voluntary sector and an active chamber of commerce. Our environmental centre would make most towns green—but only with envy. I am also proud to have the national dance studio in my constituency.

In Swindon, we are aware of our history as a railway and industrial town, now diversified to include many financial services and communication businesses. In our rural areas, farming remains vital to the economy. We know that the ability to change and diversify is the key to business success and prosperity. We have a higher level

of employment than many other areas, but there is still a need for skills training and job opportunities for many. We welcome the firms that have made their home in Swindon, attracted by our facilities, our work force and our excellent communications with the rest of the country.

Swindon's borough council has done much for the town. It has this year become a unitary authority and looks forward optimistically to the revival of local government.

The town of Swindon has grown quickly, and facilities such as the health service have been under huge pressure to keep up with demand. My hon. Friend the Member for North Swindon raised a number of concerns that my constituents share. I should like to pay special tribute to the many staff of all trades and professions in Swindon's health services who have worked tirelessly for patients in what have been, over the past 18 years, increasingly difficult circumstances.

Princess Margaret hospital has experienced large increases in patient work loads, partly because of the increasing population of the town, but partly also because of the closure of Princess Alexandra hospital in Wroughton, which is also in my constituency. It was a services hospital, but it treated thousands of NHS patients. It was highly valued by local people and is much missed. Millions of pounds were spent on new theatres and a scanner for the hospital only a few years before its closure—

It being Ten o'clock, the motion for the Adjournment of the House lapsed, without Question put.

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—[Mr. Pope.]

Ms Drown: South Swindon finds it difficult to understand why a much valued hospital with all that recent investment was closed. Princess Margaret hospital was built using state-of-the-art designs and building materials of the 1960s and 1970s. The buildings are now out of date; the Health and Safety Executive and the fire service are concerned about our buildings. We must meet those concerns and ensure that the facilities are updated to modern standards.

Not only did we face a number of weeks last winter when the hospital could accept only patients with life-threatening conditions, but the number of patients waiting more than 12 months is now significantly higher than it was last year. Because the urology waiting list is already 18 months long, GPs are not putting any more patients on the list. That means patients waiting until they become emergency cases to get treatment.

There are genuine problems with recruiting nurses. Many people feel that the training courses are too academic and may put off recruits who would do the profession proud. Mental health facilities also need upgrading, and plans for that are progressing well. Support for our community facilities is also vital.

In all parts of the NHS, more managers are in place and there is increased bureaucracy. Our health region spends £320,000 on bureaucrats every day: that cannot be right. Swindon wants money spent on patients, not paperwork. Yesterday's Gracious Speech outlined how the Government will do just that.

The most pressing need, however, is for a decision on the future of Princess Margaret hospital. The business case was approved some years ago in principle. It then had to be tested under the Government of the day's private finance initiative. That process caused delays.

In April of last year, Swindon was told that it would have a completely new hospital; we were told to expect work to commence soon after September 1996—yet not even a planning application has been lodged. The new hospital proposal is with the Treasury as we speak. It is regrettable that many details of the scheme have not been available to patient groups or the general public. Less has been available in Swindon than has been provided to groups concerned with projects elsewhere in the country. The people of South Swindon have a right to know what is planned for their health care provision. I hope that the Minister will ensure that more information is made available to the people of Swindon.

We have lived with the uncertainty over our hospital for long enough. Swindon needs to know that its hospital will be modernised. It needs to know that the proposed privately financed scheme will provide value for money for generations to come. It is no good having a more expensive big shiny hospital if we find in future that we do not have the money to send patients to it.

Swindon needs to know that a modernised hospital will be run by the NHS in the interests of Swindon patients. That is of particular concern to the hospital's hard-working staff. Many of them have put in years of dedicated service to the NHS because they wanted to work for the NHS. They are now threatened with forcible transfer to private companies. I urge the Minister to find ways to allow those who wish to remain part of NHS teams to continue their valued service as part of the NHS.

Having pointed out the difficulties, I want to record my optimism about the future of the NHS in Swindon. Morale has been low, but health service workers are enthusiastic about the new Labour Government. If we can harness the enthusiasm and initiative of health workers and learn from their experience, I am confident that the NHS will once again be the envy of the rest of the world.

The NHS is a great institution. The society in which we and our fellow citizens will be looked after when we are ill, however rich or poor we are, is a civilised and great society. I ask the Minister to work with Members of this House to ensure that we deliver what the people of Swindon need—a modernised hospital service giving quality health care to those who need it.

10.4 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. Alan Milburn): It is a special honour to be able to respond to this Adjournment debate—first to welcome you to the Chair, Mr. Deputy Speaker; secondly to congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North Swindon (Mr. Wills) on securing this debate so early in his parliamentary career; and thirdly to congratulate him and my hon. Friend the Member for South Swindon (Ms Drown) on making such impressive maiden speeches. They have argued their case forcefully, sincerely and, if I may say so, with some expertise.

I have had the opportunity to speak to both my hon. Friends since their election and I can confirm that they are health service experts. I value that greatly as an incoming Health Minister. I shall be relying on some of the expertise that they have to offer, not just on issues relating to Swindon, but on more general issues.

I am, of course, sympathetic to the concerns that my hon. Friends have expressed about the state of the national health service in the town. I pay tribute in particular to all

those who in recent years have worked so hard in difficult circumstances to cope with the pressures that the local health service has had to face, particularly during the winter months.

There are obviously no quick and easy solutions to the problems in the NHS that the outgoing Government have bequeathed to this Government, but I can assure my hon. Friends that we are already taking action to tackle bureaucracy in the national health service and we are taking the first steps towards replacing the absurd internal market, which is the cause of so much of that excessive bureaucracy. Our ambition for the national health service is no less than to modernise it and equip it properly for the challenges of not just the next few years but the next century.

The Swindon and Marlborough trust faces particular pressures, as my hon. Friends said, because of anticipated high population growth in the area and the recent closure of the hospital at RAF Wroughton. As my hon. Friends have made clear, there is pressing local concern about the facilities from which care is currently delivered and about the delays that there have been in replacing those facilities under the private finance initiative.

Proposals for a new Princess Margaret hospital were first put forward for approval in 1994. Since then, they have been subject to delay after delay. It has become clear that the initial proposal fell short of the demanding standards required to secure clear approval.

I understand that the trust has now submitted the final details of its revised proposal for consideration. Whatever the outcome of that deliberation, I assure my hon. Friends that clinical considerations and service needs will in no way be overlooked. They will be central to an assessment of the proposal. I am pleased that a Swindon forum has been established, meeting regularly and chaired jointly by the trust and the health authority. I hope that it will ensure that local decisions are taken not in isolation but with proper regard to the views of all interested parties.

It is clearly important that such a major proposal secures the confidence of the local people. As far as possible, open details should be made available to people in the area about the nature of the proposal. It is not the consortium's national health service; it is not even the trust's national health service; and it is not mine. It is the people's national health service, and we should never ever forget that.

Schemes such as the one in Swindon have been in the PFI procurement process for too long and I believe that that cannot continue. In such cases, a decision needs to be made, which confirms either that the project is suitable for agreement with the private sector partner, or that it is not. Both public and private sector participants must not be left indefinitely wrestling with schemes, trying to satisfy ill-defined rules, only to find that there is a finishing line that moves forward continually.

Unlike our predecessors, this Government are committed to developing public-private partnerships in the national health service which actually work and do the business of getting new hospitals off the ground. They should lay the bricks and the mortar. The time for talking on these issues has come to an end. This Government want to be remembered as a Government who built hospitals rather than as a Government who promised the building of hospitals. We are determined to rejuvenate the private finance initiative and to get it working.

[Mr. Alan Milburn]

It is precisely to deal with problems such as those faced by Swindon that my hon. Friend the Paymaster General announced on 8 May a major review of the PFI across government. His aim is to remove the obstacles in the way of bringing projects to fruition and to find ways in which to streamline the whole process. At the same time, I can announce this evening that I have asked my officials to carry out an urgent review of the PFI process in the national health service. I will listen to the views of those closely involved with the PFI from both the public and private sectors. The objective will be to identify how the current gridlock can be eliminated and to ensure that much needed schemes are completed quickly, making best use of the skills and expertise of both the public and private sectors to achieve best value for money.

I know that all talk of a review inevitably leads to some concern about the potential for delay, so I shall try to pre-empt my hon. Friends' concerns on that point. Perhaps I can best point to the progress that we seek to make on the PFI by reference to the proceedings today in another place. The Government introduced a new Bill in the other place to speed progress on the PFI. The Bill will clarify the powers of NHS trusts to enter into PFI-type agreements and it will remove one roadblock that has caused considerable frustration and delay for some of the

most advanced schemes. It signals the Government's absolute determination to speed up the process of attracting private capital into the national health service and our commitment to make sure that public-private partnerships actually deliver the goods.

I very much hope that a PFI solution can be found for the redevelopment in Swindon. I share the desire of people in the town to see their NHS facilities improved. I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friends for making their case so eloquently. I can tell them that today, I have instructed the NHS executive to agree with the trust a clear way forward for the project and for other schemes that have already been approved, but which have not made the progress expected of them. I shall also ask the trust's chief executive to make himself available to meet my hon. Friends to explain the PFI proposal in more detail, so that they and their constituents are clear about it.

I offer my hon. Friends an open invitation. I am happy at whatever point to meet them to give them the opportunity further to press their case on this very important proposal. The way in which they have rationally and cogently argued their case this evening is important and it speaks volumes for the Swindon team that we can expect in this House for many years to come.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at fourteen minutes past Ten o'clock.

House of Commons

Friday 16 May 1997

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER in the Chair]

Madam Speaker: Will any hon. Member desirous of taking their seat please use this opportunity to come to the Table?

Orders of the Day

Debate on the Address

[THIRD DAY]

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on Question [14 May].

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, as follows:—

Most Gracious Sovereign,

We, Your Majesty's most dutiful and loyal subjects, the Commons of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, in Parliament assembled, beg leave to offer our humble thanks to Your Majesty for the Gracious Speech which Your Majesty has addressed to both Houses of Parliament.—
[Mr. Kaufman.]

Question again proposed.

The Constitution

9.34 am

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr. Donald Dewar): As the House will know, it is more than 18 months since I made a speech in the House, so I hope that colleagues will live with a certain disorder of process. It may be bad news for some of my colleagues that I hope to hit my stride later.

I start with a few congratulations, as I think that that would be in order. In particular, I congratulate the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague) on his survival. It is, in a sense, a significant achievement. To the question, "What did you do in the great rout of 1997, daddy?" he can answer with genuine pride, "I was still there at the end of the day."

The right hon. Gentleman is, of course—or has been, because there is a bit of ambiguity at the moment—the spokesman on Welsh affairs. I understand, from reading the public prints, that he has other ambitions, but it would not be for me to wish him well. It is not for me to take a partial view of those matters, although I do, of course, recognise some of the strengths of his position. Many people have been elected to high office on the basis of not being someone else, and the fact that he is not the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) or the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard) may stand him in quite good stead at the end of the day.

If the right hon. Gentleman's ambitions do not materialise, I suspect that he might still speak on Welsh matters. Who knows, he may even get his step—if not in the peerage, at least in seniority—by having added responsibilities, such as speaking for Scotland. I say that because there is, as he will have noticed, a vacancy in that Department. I spoke to an obvious contender the other day. I would not dream of naming him, but when I suggested that he might be given that responsibility, such was the alarm and distress that, as a matter of humanity, I have not canvassed further among the candidates, as clearly that is bad for morale in the Conservative party.

I do, however, want to make a serious point about the general election and the campaign. There is no doubt that, from a very early stage, the then Prime Minister, now Leader of the Opposition, took the view that he could make considerable progress by concentrating on the constitutional issue. He bore it almost about his person, like an electoral comforter to be returned to whenever the going got tough. One thing on which every hon. Member can agree, however, is that it was not an issue that delivered victory. It failed the then Prime Minister because his argument was wrong and his fears misplaced. People were not impressed with his particular line of argument.

I noticed during the campaign that, on the constitutional issue, the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks accused the Labour party of treating people with contempt. I remind him—he will be uncomfortably aware of this—that if the electorate showed contempt, it was reserved for the charges, the scare stories, on the issue that were being run from the Conservative side of the political debate.

I notice that the right hon. Gentleman is going to Scotland, according to the press. He is, according to the *Daily Mail*,

"the main choice of the Scots to lead them out of the wilderness".

He will

"hammer home an anti-devolution message."

If the *Daily Mail* is right, I suggest that the right hon. Gentleman, before he decides on his line, takes a few soundings in case he is left looking like the last of the Bourbons—someone who has learnt nothing and is prepared to make no change in position, however necessary. It is generous of him to go to Scotland, because he will be busy on other matters at the moment. Whatever the virtues of going to Scotland, it will certainly not be a canvassing trip for the Conservatives' leadership election. As far as the Scottish Conservatives are concerned, this is—in an absolute sense—a no-vote campaign and that is worrying them considerably.

Seriously, there are clearly many changes in the views of Scottish Conservatives on devolution. A cynic might say that so complete a disaster encourages fresh thinking. If there is a reappraisal and if a change of mind is in the offing, clearly that is something that I would welcome and want to encourage.

The right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks should look at some of the quotations. *The Daily Telegraph* of 9 May reported that the deputy chairman of the Conservative party in Scotland said:

"The Party had its own Little Big Horn last week and everyone who fought for the status quo in Scotland went down to defeat."

[Mr. Donald Dewar]

The article reported that he

"outlined a radical plan that included backing devolution and a one member one vote system for the election of the Tory leader."

The latter is not so directly relevant to our debate, but it might be of interest to the right hon. Gentleman.

In *The Scotsman* on 9 May, the president of the voluntary association—the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Association—called on his party to abandon opposition to tax-raising powers and to set up a commission to find the best way of raising revenue for a Scottish Parliament.

Dr. Norman A. Godman (Greenock and Inverclyde): While the Conservative party might be described as an English nationalist rump, does my right hon. Friend agree that our proposal for a Scottish Parliament with proportional representation would at least allow a small number of Conservative Members of Parliament to take their places within that Parliament? Surely that would be good for Scottish democracy.

Mr. Dewar: I would not call the Conservative party in Scotland simply a rump. Many people in Scotland vote Conservative, have voted Conservative in the past and will probably do so again. My hon. Friend draws our attention to an important point, because the Conservatives' bitter opposition to the proposed changes in Scotland is certainly a stand of principle, but they would be net gainers from any change proposed.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): Is this the moment to ask what the Government's thinking is on the preservation of the Barnett formula?

Mr. Dewar: I promise that I shall come in general terms to the scheme in a minute, but I should like to finish the passage that I am on and make it clear that there is a mood for change.

The right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks will know that *Scotland on Sunday* recently managed to interview 38 chairmen of constituency associations in Scotland and found that 23 of them wanted a change of policy, either supporting devolution or asking for individual conscience and no collective view on the matter in the Conservative party when the referendum came up. The Conservatives would be well advised further to consider those matters.

The chairman of the Conservative party in Scotland said:

"There's a grave danger that if there are continuing multiple rushes of blood to the head there will be a collective stroke and that is not a healthy prospect for the party."

It is not a healthy prospect for the health service either, but she makes the important point that there is time for consideration, and I hope that it will be given. That hope was echoed, as the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks will know, by the right hon. Member for Charnwood (Mr. Dorrell), who is also a potential leader of the Conservative party, when he visited Scotland recently.

I reiterate that I welcome signs of movement. It is right that there should be reconsideration. People should pause and consider.

Mr. Alex Salmond (Banff and Buchan): I do not want to intervene on the right hon. Gentleman's toying with the

Conservative party, but that is flogging a dead horse. Can we look ahead? Does he agree that the early publication of the White Paper giving the detail of the Government's proposals on devolution and a Parliament for Scotland is now very important? Given the confusion earlier this week, will he give an exact time scale for when the White Paper can be expected?

Mr. Dewar: I am happy to respond in general terms, in the sense that I agree with the proposition. The White Paper will set out the scheme in considerable detail and will be the basis on which people will consider how to vote in the referendum. Obviously, it is essential that it is produced in good time for the process to take place. We envisage that the referendums Bill, which will be before the House next week, will complete its passage, paving the way for further process. The White Paper will be published before the House rises, to allow for proper statements and further consideration. We shall then move to a referendum in the autumn. If it goes as I hope it will, the main Bill to implement the devolution settlement will follow very close behind.

I am chary about mentioning dates at this stage, because there are a number of unknowns, particularly about the parliamentary passage, but I can assure the hon. Gentleman that we shall certainly move at the best pace that we can and we shall ensure—we have evinced this already in our conduct—that it will be a fair and proper process, with plenty of time for consideration and proper debate. I hope that that does something at least to reassure the hon. Gentleman.

To return to the future, the problem for the Tories—the opportunity for us—is that it is now established that there is a need for change, which is widely recognised, but it is a question not just of the Scottish proposals, but of the much wider constitutional package; I want to range quite widely. I welcome the decision to set up on an expedited timetable a Select Committee on parliamentary procedure. It is important that the House looks into the way in which it conducts its business.

I remember a speech by, not the late but the departed colleague of the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks, Mr. Michael Portillo, in which he discussed the impact of television on the House, feeling that it was counter-productive in an age when we required more deference—an interesting instance of attitudes. Knowledge, he argued, destroyed respect. The implication was that the cameras should not have been let in. My reaction to such an argument is simple and different. If people are concerned and worried because they can see how we conduct our affairs, we should tackle the problems and not try to drop a veil of secrecy once more.

Whatever we do, our aim will be to strengthen the role of the House and to improve parliamentary scrutiny, but there is a wider malaise. There is no doubt that government is seen by many people as remote and inaccessible. There has been a failure to respond to and control the growth of the unelected state. There has been a reluctance to trust people to take decisions. That is where the case for devolution—the passing of power to Scotland and Wales—comes in. It is a case which is essentially democratic.

The Secretary of State for Wales will speak later in the debate. Of course, Scotland has well-established and distinct traditions, as is recognised in the House by the

stream of legislation covering and limited to Scotland, reflecting our different legal and social traditions. That justifies and, indeed, I would use a stronger word, leads to a justified demand for, direct democratic reform. The reform is based firmly within the United Kingdom. The idea is that we strengthen the Union if we show that it can adapt to the needs of and accommodate the wishes of peoples in various parts of the United Kingdom.

We are asking Parliament to pass powerful and better governance of the country to a Parliament in Scotland and an Assembly in Wales, and we look forward to continuing discussions about movement and change in other parts of the country. I must stress that it is self-evident that, as it is a passing of power by this Parliament, it cannot happen unless there is the consent of a majority in this Parliament—a Parliament that represents every part of the country.

Briefly, to return to the point raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell), the system is based on partnership, which includes the pooling of resources and their distribution on a formula that is agreed and acceptable to all parts of the United Kingdom. That is a matter for negotiation with the Treasury and ultimately the Scottish Parliament and Scottish Executive, as my hon. Friend knows, as it has been in the past with the Scottish Office.

I have no intention—or, I should say, the Government have no intention, as my views are not necessarily important—of changing that basic system and procedure. It will all turn on the issue of consent. I have referred to the matter briefly, because we shall deal with it again next week on Second Reading of the referendums Bill. I am well aware of the argument that general elections are fought on a multiplicity of issues and therefore do not decisively end the argument about consent. Some days ago, a Conservative said to me that the vote in Scotland had nothing to do with devolution. He said, "It is just that they did not like us." I genuinely understand what he meant and I find the totality of the argument difficult to rebut.

The course that we have adopted is right and, as we are making the point about the need to involve and trust people, we think that the referendum road is the right one. I am glad that we are following it. There will be debate about the second question in the referendum, but it is important to end the controversy. As I shall argue at greater length next week, it is odd that a directly elected Parliament with legislative powers should in some way not be trusted with the discipline and responsibility of financial powers, when such discipline and responsibility apply to every other tier of local and national Government. That is an odd non-sequitur.

Our proposed scheme is practicable. It is certainly courageous and it is principled, because we are trying to address some of the more obvious difficulties in the present electoral system in terms of the nature of the Scottish Parliament. It is especially principled because my party will probably not be one of the beneficiaries of the process. However, we thought that it was right and we went for it. I do not intend to retreat from that or apologise for it. There will be many checks and balances and many opportunities for debate. I look forward to that.

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (North Essex) *rose*—

Mr. Dewar: I shall take the former parliamentary private secretary to the Secretary of State for Scotland.

Mr. Jenkin: I own up to that accolade. The Secretary of State spoke about a Scottish Parliament without tax-raising powers as a non-sequitur. I have two questions. First, why is such a non-sequitur proposed for Wales? Secondly, if the answer to the second question in the referendum is that the Scots do not want the tartan tax, will he persist with his non-sequitur?

Mr. Dewar: I said that I would take the hon. Gentleman. I shall not take him, but I shall answer him. The Government are not in the business of rigidly forcing a template upon every part of the United Kingdom. We shall consider opinion and appropriateness. We propose a different scheme for Wales because its needs and aspirations are different. That seems a sensible way to proceed.

On regional developments, we have already allowed for the possibility of development agencies. We have made it clear that we shall discuss and listen to opinion in the regions and move only if there is consent and support for the change. The worst scenario would be for the Government to prattle on—

Mr. Jenkin: The right hon. Gentleman is waffling.

Mr. Dewar: The hon. Gentleman knows all about waffle. I am trying to make an important point to which I hope he will listen. It would be unfortunate if the Government spoke about the need to consult and to move democratically and then attempted to impose from the centre solutions that were not necessarily acceptable. I am afraid that the hon. Gentleman's hopes about a split vote will be disappointed. I have every confidence that we shall complete our programme.

Many people want to take part in the debate, and I am impressed by the enthusiasm of new Members. This is the largest attendance on a Friday that I have seen for some time.

I mentioned development agencies in the English regions and how we shall handle that. In London, there will once again be consultation, as there should be. I think that the overwhelming view will be that it is nonsense for such a great capital city to remain voiceless and to have its administration and responsibility fragmented and inevitably weakened. It is right to look at the government of London, to try to create a sensible and strong voice for the city.

During this Parliament, we shall start the process of reforming the upper House. Neither I nor my colleagues are here to lash out at the Lords. It is not a matter of the politics of envy or of old enmities remembered. We certainly do not intend to belittle the integrity or commitment of individual members of that Chamber. However, there is a case for sensible change and we must rethink the role of the House of Lords, which is full of anomalies. While it bravely tries to do its job, it is often limited by its structures. The starting point of removing the votes of hereditary peers is sensible, but I stress that it is the first instalment, the first stage of an important constitutional reform.

[Mr. Dewar]

I think that I am right in saying that in 1995-96, two thirds of the votes won by the Government in the Lords would have been reversed if hereditary peers had not had the vote. That is important in terms of the day-to-day management of the House. I say gently and, I hope, tactfully, that it is difficult to argue that hereditary peers are drawn from a wide and representative stratum of society. We should address that. I discovered in some reading a few days ago that it worried Lord Curzon. If it worried George Nathaniel Curzon, it ought to worry us.

I think that we have allies among Conservative Members. It is strange that although Conservatives defend as absolutely essential the presence of hereditary peers, they are remarkably coy about creating hereditary peerages. Those that are created are carefully selected, although I shall go no further into that. New hereditary peerages are almost as rare as Scottish Conservative Members. I know from personal experience and civilised debate that the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks is coy about saying that, if by mishap at some future date—I accept that pendulums swing, especially after the events of two weeks ago—a Conservative Government should come to power after we have abolished the hereditary principle, they will reintroduce it. I welcome that sensible stance, but I suspect that Conservatives defend it simply because, as is their innate wont, it is there and not because they believe in it.

Sir Nicholas Lyell (North-East Bedfordshire): I have a straightforward question for the Secretary of State. How can it possibly be right to destroy or fundamentally alter the existing structure, without first thinking through and putting before the House what is intended to replace it?

Mr. Dewar: No questions are quite straightforward, even those from the right hon. and learned Gentleman. We think that the hereditary principle is indefensible and that it should go, and we shall defend that proposition as it stands. A more broadly based House of Lords could continue with its present role. However, we have gone further and said that there are some interesting ideas on the role of the upper House and on how it can be made more directly representative. There are ideas on the part that elections should play in that process and on whether the Lords should have the role of a constitutional watchdog.

I am not endorsing any of those ideas, but they are interesting and this first stage would give them an impetus. I understand that the right hon. and learned Gentleman does not disagree; those matters will have to be settled in debate in the House and in the public domain.

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot): If the hereditary principle is unacceptable, where does that leave the Sovereign?

Mr. Dewar: The Sovereign is in a quite different position. The hon. Gentleman's question would be fair if the Sovereign were a political figure who was involved in the maelstrom of political argument. If I suggested that the Sovereign should be given such a role, even marginally, I suspect that the hon. Gentleman would be the first to say that that was anathema and totally

unacceptable. We are dealing with a different set of propositions in different circumstances. The hon. Gentleman is right to suggest that it is important to maintain that distinction and to underline it. As I say, I hope that the House will look forward with me to that continuing debate.

I stress that we are looking at a five-year programme and that, although the revival of our constitution and bringing people back into the political debate more effectively is enormously important, there is much else of interest to this Administration. Health, education, housing and the economy will all have formidable consideration, both in the House and in the Government, as will the search for peace in Northern Ireland. I understand that the Prime Minister is in the Province today, which is always a continuing concern and of importance to us.

I should mention one other theme in the package: the protection of individual rights. The European convention on human rights will be imported, although not into the law of the United Kingdom, because it is already there. The rather revolutionary suggestion is that we should allow British courts to deal with a law that we imported some 50 years ago. Sometimes people say that we are rushing into and hurrying things. It is extraordinary that this necessary and important reform has been waiting for 50 years; I am personally glad to see it in our programme. There is no reason why people who want to have the protection of the European convention on human rights or who think that it is relevant to their case should have to go to Strasbourg to seek redress at considerable—

Mr. Bernard Jenkin: People can come to this Parliament.

Mr. Dewar: No. We are talking about the courts system, and I am sure that the hon. Gentleman, ingenious though he is, will not suggest that we import into this building the entire legal machinery and process. If he does, I look forward to the flow chart that he will produce.

Mr. Jenkin: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Dewar: No. When we come to the debate on the European convention on human rights, the hon. Gentleman can make his point, but there is great unanimity of opinion in the legal profession and among people who are interested in law reform.

The freedom of information Bill will also be part of our programme. As hon. Members will know, there is a long and honourable tradition of Back-Bench attempts to introduce such a Bill, most recently by the Under-Secretary of State for National Heritage, my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent, Central (Mr. Fisher). There will be a wide welcome in the community as well as in the House for the decision to import such a measure into legislation under the auspices of the present Government. No one could deny that there is a case for a more open approach and for more transparency in government. I think of the debates, and I will not go into them, about the Scott inquiry, and the circumstances surrounding them, and of even more mundane-sounding matters such as food safety. There are circumstances in which secrecy can bring cruel dangers, as we in Scotland know from the E. coli outbreak—sadly, I understand that another case was reported today.

It is right, therefore, that we should move down that road and take such a Bill on board. We should ask the House, obviously with proper safeguards for national security, to put on to the statute book a freedom of information Act, which will do much for the public perception of government. We should not underestimate our own image problem in that respect and the image problem of the House. It is not just image; it is perhaps more than that. *[Interruption.]* I apologise, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I had turned the pager off, but there is obviously an error in the system. I shall cast it away. I think that I had better finish. It may be that a very efficient private office is reminding me that I have spoken for my allotted time and that I should sit down.

Obviously, there will be much debate, and I do not doubt that changes will come. I want to make it clear, however, that we shall listen and that we shall be prepared to learn from the opinions of others. What we are not prepared to do, however, is to duck the issues that matter or to settle for second best. My Government believe that there is demand for progress. I am sure that the priorities are right and exciting times lie ahead. Judging by what happened on May day and judging by the results that many of us watched with wild surprise but great satisfaction, I believe that the public also agree that it is time for change.

10.3 am

Mr. William Hague (Richmond, Yorks): May I begin by congratulating not only you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, on your election to the Chair, but, on behalf of the Opposition, the Secretary of State for Scotland and, indeed, the Secretary of State for Wales on their appointments.

The Secretary of State for Scotland and I have debated a wide variety of subjects on many occasions on the Floor of the House and in Committee. After our service together on the Committee that considered the Pensions Bill in the previous Parliament, I think that I can say that, in my eight years so far as a Member of Parliament, I have spent more time listening to him than to any other Member.

The Secretary of State will understand, therefore, that I approached with mixed feelings the discovery that his voice has been returned to him. I do not want to alarm new Members, but the speech that he has just delivered is the shortest that I have ever known him deliver in the many years that I have spent listening to him. I do not know whether it is because he has turned over a new leaf, because he has yet to find his feet or because the message that he received was from the Minister without Portfolio telling him to stop at once. Whichever it was, we look forward to the Secretary of State's speeches.

The Secretary of State has set out a programme for this Session of far-reaching constitutional change. The Government wish, by establishing a Scottish Parliament and a Welsh Assembly in particular, to bring about fundamental change in the way in which the United Kingdom is governed. Our contention is that those proposals would amount to a fundamental and far-reaching error, damage the interests of Scotland and Wales, lead to widespread disillusionment and bitterness, create an unstable and unsustainable constitutional situation, and severely weaken and undermine the unity of the United Kingdom.

Before I turn to those proposals in more detail, it would be wrong to let this debate on the constitution pass without noting that the Government have already created

three separate controversies over parliamentary and constitutional matters in their first two weeks in office. The first was the decision by the Prime Minister and the Chancellor of the Exchequer to give independence to the Bank of England without waiting to inform the House of their decision or even holding a meeting of the Cabinet.

What would the Secretary of State have said, as the Opposition Chief Whip in the previous Parliament, if the previous Government had made a decision of such fundamental importance without making a statement on the Floor of the House of Commons to announce it? Was the decision rushed out for reasons of pressing national interest or was the Cabinet not consulted because it did not suit the media-management timetable of the Minister without Portfolio? The whole episode was an early indication that we will have not so much Government by Cabinet as Government by cabal.

If the decision gave off a whiff of arrogance, that was nothing to the odour that emerged when the Prime Minister announced a change in the procedures for his own Question Time without so much as a nod, request or acknowledgment in the direction of the rest of the House. Such changes should be considered by Committees and by all parties in the House. The spectacle of a Prime Minister seeking in his first days to ensure that the questions put to him in the House are more easily predictable is not an attractive one.

Legally and according to the rules, the Prime Minister is entitled to do it, but Labour Members may learn to their cost that, although it is technically permissible to exploit and to misuse a huge parliamentary majority, they would be well advised not to do it. They should bear that in mind, too, before they break the long-accepted convention that Bills of the nature that they propose for constitutional change should be considered on the Floor of the House. It is ever clearer that the Government plan to break that convention. It is clear from their waffle, although they have not yet had the courage to say it outright. On Wednesday, the Prime Minister said:

"There will be ample time for debate"—*[Official Report, 14 May 1997; Vol. 294, c. 67.]*

and that the new Committee on procedures would think about all this. Why did he not have the courage to say that the Government are paving the way for the most far-reaching constitutional changes proposed for years to be largely considered in a Committee upstairs, staffed with selected Government Back Benchers who would barely say a word? Where would we have been in the 1970s if Mr. Neil Kinnock, then a Member, had not been able to speak on devolution matters? He said in 1977:

"As we work our way through this Bill in Committee, we shall more and more adequately demonstrate that many claims made for devolution are false".—*[Official Report, 18 January 1977; Vol. 924, c. 150.]*

He would not have been able to demonstrate that if the Bill had been dealt with in a Committee upstairs. Can the Secretary of State and his colleagues make it clear, in the light of reports in this morning's press, that Members of Parliament in the Labour party who wish to campaign against devolution proposals will be free to do so?

The hon. Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) was present earlier, but he has popped out for a moment. He and the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent (Mr. Smith) have always made it clear that they are opposed to devolution, and they have been elected as Members of

[Mr. William Hague]

Parliament on that basis. Will the Secretary of State confirm that if they want to speak against the proposals, they will be free to do so? If not, by what right, in a parliamentary democracy and a free Parliament, can they be told that they are not free to do so? I am not talking about members of the Government, who are bound by collective responsibility, but about Back Benchers with a clear record of speaking out on this matter, and with long-held and clearly expressed views. It now seems that they will be prevented from speaking their minds, because that may bring the Labour party into disrepute. The Secretary of State should now make it clear that they are free to speak their minds in the House and in the forthcoming referendum campaigns.

Mr. Dewar: May I make it clear to the right hon. Gentleman that any Member of Parliament has a right to speak his or her mind as he or she sees fit. It is true that we offer advice [*Interruption.*] Conservative Members laugh. I will allow and listen to their laughter if the right hon. Gentleman says that, from now on, there will be no whipping in the Conservative party. Whipping is advice, and I do not imagine for a moment that he will tell us that there will be no Conservative party position on matters of importance and no whipping system.

Mr. Hague: Of course, all parties give advice to their members. All Governments and Oppositions take positions and have policies. But to say that Members of Parliament would be forbidden to campaign for a no vote in a devolution campaign is a different matter. I presume, from the Secretary of State's reaction, that that will not be the position, and that Labour Back Benchers who want to campaign against devolution will be free to do so.

The Prime Minister said last Wednesday that

"the people will not expect us to be game-playing here—they will expect us to legislate."—[*Official Report*, 14 May 1997; Vol. 294, c. 68.]

His words convey an approach to parliamentary debate that has a certain chilling arrogance. The proposals for pre-legislative referendums may be part of that pattern.

First, let me turn to the core of the Government's constitutional plans to establish a Scottish Parliament and a Welsh Assembly.

Mr. Salmond: I am trying to follow the argument. Surely the shadow spokesman is not saying that no sanctions can be taken by a political party against its members if they do not follow policy. I recall that the previous Prime Minister tried to do that somewhat unsuccessfully with some Conservative Back Benchers on Europe.

On constitutional probity, I offer the right hon. Gentleman an opportunity to distance himself from the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood), who said that the 50 per cent. rule should be applied to a referendum in Scotland. That would mean that the vote of the dead, the infirm and the don't cares would have to be garnered. Under the 50 per cent. rule, the Conservative party would have only 12 per cent. of the vote in Scotland.

If the right hon. Gentleman is not prepared to distance himself from that view, will he tell us whether he believes that such a rule should be applied to a European or Northern Irish referendum, both of which are supported by the Conservative party?

Mr. Hague: No, I think that there is a powerful case for a threshold in a referendum. I shall deal with that issue later.

The Government's plans are based on long-established Labour party policy. It is something of an irony that, after everything we have heard about new Labour, its flagship Bills on devolution in 1997 will be almost exactly the same as its ill-fated proposals in which it became mired and tangled in 1979. Labour is committed now, as it was then, to creating an additional, expensive tier of government, which will do no favours for Scotland and Wales, and which will make nonsense of some of the operations of the House.

Now that the Labour party is in office and is preparing to implement its plans, we expect the Government to answer clearly the questions that Labour has been unwilling to answer for so long. During the election campaign, the right hon. Member for Caerphilly (Mr. Davies), now the Secretary of State for Wales, described Plaid Cymru's proposals for a tax-raising Parliament in Wales as a blueprint for a fool's paradise and economic illiteracy. He said that it was economic illiteracy to think that we could have one tax rate on one side of the Welsh border and another tax rate on the other side. We look forward to the Secretaries of State for Scotland and for Wales together explaining why what is economic illiteracy in Wales is essential to the future of Scotland.

We look forward to the right hon. Gentlemen reconciling, by their policy, the statement of the Secretary of State for Defence, the right hon. Member for Hamilton, South (Mr. Robertson), when he was shadow Scottish Secretary, who said:

"The parliament has to have the power"—

to raise tax—

"even if it is never used, because no level of government has been denied some control of revenue raising or cutting. Indeed, the lack of such a power and the conflict this might provoke is a more significant danger than having it."

Why is it that the Government propose no such power for the Welsh Assembly? What is the logic of their wanting the Scottish Parliament to have tax-raising powers—or tax-varying powers, as they put it—while maintaining the ludicrous fiction that the Scottish Parliament might not want to spend the money allocated to it, and saying that the Welsh Assembly should have no such powers? Have they got something against the Scots, or do they not trust the Welsh?

The Secretary of State for Wales said in June last year that a Welsh Assembly would not have tax-raising powers initially. Is that still his view? If so, is it his view that there should be another referendum later on tax-raising powers? Will he give an undertaking that any proposals to extend tax-raising powers to a Welsh Assembly would be subject to another referendum? Why does he not want to ask the people of Wales now, at the same time as people in Scotland, whether they want tax-raising powers for an Assembly?

Why would the Scottish Parliament have powers to legislate in every major area of Scottish domestic policy, including local government, the national health service, education, housing and transport, but the Welsh Assembly would not have the power to legislate on any of those matters? Why would the Welsh Assembly have fewer powers than the Scottish Parliament, which the Prime Minister likened to a parish council?

What is the logic, the principle or the deep constitutional thinking that leads the Government to treat Scotland and Wales in such radically different ways? If the Government believe that their model for devolution in Scotland will work, why do they not propose the same for Wales? If they do not believe that their proposals will work, why do they not abandon them altogether?

The truth is that the proposals are not based on any logic or principle. They are based on ill-thought-out proposals that the Labour party were left with in the 1970s, and which it has not had the wisdom to change. They are not based on a clear assessment of how the redrawn constitution would work in practice, but on the internal politics of the Labour party and the varying degree to which it believes nationalism needs to be appeased.

The people of Wales would be asked to pay for the non-legislating, non-tax-raising Assembly that is proposed for Wales. The Referendums (Scotland and Wales) Bill was published yesterday and sets out, for the first time, some of the costs involved. It will cost £5 million to hold a referendum in Scotland, and £3 million in Wales. Preliminary work to set up the bodies would cost £18 million to £25 million in Scotland and £5 million to £15 million in Wales.

Will the Secretary of State make it clear today—people in Wales will certainly want to know—whether that money will come out of the Scottish and Welsh blocks or whether it will be an addition to public expenditure as a whole? Are the Government already breaching the public spending targets to which they are committed, or will the money come from cuts in public services in Scotland and Wales? It must be one or the other. They can answer now if they wish. It is a simple question and there must be an answer. The Secretaries of State must have thought about where the money was coming from before they put their names to the Bill, but they evidently do not want to tell the House of Commons now.

Let me try the right hon. Gentleman with another question, seeing as the Secretary of State for Wales did not know the answer to that one. How much of the money for the preliminary work on a Welsh Assembly will be spent in advance of the referendum? If the result were no, who would recompense the taxpayer for the money that would have been wasted? What are the Government's estimates of the full cost of establishing a Scottish Parliament and a Welsh Assembly?

A far more fundamental question is what would be the relationship of the Parliament and the Assembly with the House of Commons. If a different party to the party in power at Westminster had a majority in Cardiff or Edinburgh, how could deadlock between them be avoided? What would happen if a Welsh Assembly refused to implement legislation passed by the House of Commons?

The Prime Minister said in the general election campaign that sovereignty rested with him as an English Member of Parliament. Is that the position? If so, what is

the ultimate power and purpose of a Scottish Parliament? What would be the role of Scottish Members of Parliament after the power to legislate on all matters of Scottish domestic policy had been devolved?

Does the Secretary of State for Scotland believe that it is right that he should be able to vote on legislation affecting my constituents in Yorkshire, whereas neither he nor I would be able to vote in legislation affecting his constituents in Glasgow? Does he believe that it is right that the number of Scottish and Welsh Members should remain the same? Does he believe that it is right that a Scottish Member could sit in the House as a Minister for Agriculture, Health or Education and make decisions affecting the daily lives of everyone's constituents but his own?

Those are the fundamental questions, which the hon. Member for Linlithgow—it is such a pity that he is no longer the hon. Member for West Lothian—raised 20 years ago; and still there are no answers to those questions. What will be the position on dual membership of a Scottish Parliament and the House? Does the Secretary of State for Scotland intend to stand for election to the Scottish Parliament? If not, what do the Secretary of State for Scotland and the Secretary of State for Wales intend to do with their jobs after they have devolved all their powers to someone else?

The Secretary of State for Wales has been fond of saying that a Welsh assembly would take over the functions of the Secretary of State for Wales and exercise them in a more democratic manner. After such an assembly is established, therefore, presumably there will be no justification for the continued existence of his position as Secretary of State for Wales. That is another question which the Labour party has refused to answer.

The Secretary of State for Wales has said that he would negotiate with the Treasury every year, but that would take only a few weeks. Deprived of other powers and responsibilities, the Secretary of State for Wales would be a message-boy, scurrying between the assembly and Westminster. He would be a political eunuch—an ornament of doubtful constitutional value, rather than a functioning part of the body politic.

There is a great deal more that we will need to know. Labour Members do not like to be asked questions, but now that they are on the Government Benches, they will have to become accustomed to being asked questions. Moreover, before very long, they will have to start answering some questions. I repeat that there is a great deal more that we will need to know. The Government now have the power to introduce their proposals, but they also have the responsibility to start answering the questions on those proposals.

What would be the role of Members of Parliament in the Public Accounts Committee in relation to money raised by the House but spent by a Welsh Assembly? How would public appointments be made and political bias in appointments to public bodies be avoided? I have already asked about the Government's position on the future of financial arrangements. What will that position mean for local government? We must have the answers to all those questions.

If those questions cannot be answered, and answered well, the Government will be taking the United Kingdom towards constitutional instability, and towards the division of the United Kingdom itself. The Government risk

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creating, at great expense, new parliamentary bodies that could not possibly fulfil the expectations that their creation would raise. After several disappointing and fractious years, their creation would produce a sense of disillusionment and a culture of buck passing in which Cardiff would blame Westminster, Edinburgh would blame Westminster, Westminster would blame the others, and the common basis of our Union would be fractured.

The Government do not yet have a mandate for those proposals, they have only a mandate to hold referendums on them. The manner in which they decided to propose referendums was in itself revealing, because the decision seems to have been made without reference to the leaders of the Scottish and the Welsh Labour parties—so much for believing that Scotland and Wales should have their own say. On 24 June 1996, the Secretary of State for Wales ruled out a referendum. I remember it well, because I was sitting next to him. He went even further and said:

"The trouble with a pre-legislative referendum is that there are so many questions you cannot answer."

We were all astonished—although probably no one was more astonished about it than himself—that, three days later, he was advocating not only a referendum but, specifically, a pre-legislative referendum. Perhaps the only people more astonished were those in the Scottish Labour party, who—in the space of six weeks—had a policy of no referendum, a policy of one referendum with one question, a policy of two referendums with three questions and a policy of one referendum with two questions, which is where they have finally come to rest.

Opposition Members think that it is right to hold referendums on those proposals. We also think that, after rejection of devolution in the 1979 referendums, it is right that the people should again be asked again when the same proposals are reintroduced. However, although the concept of holding the referendums is a good one, and the mandate for holding them is clear, the time and manner of the proposed referendums represent yet another constitutional innovation by the Government, and again it is a deeply disturbing one.

Last year, the right hon. Member for Caerphilly warned us about the dangers of a pre-legislative referendum—only three days before he adopted it as his policy. Previous referendums have been held in ways which allowed the electorate to endorse or reject detailed proposals which have already passed by Parliament. The voters could consider all the detail; they could balance the pros and cons; and they could know exactly what was on offer. Used in that manner, referendums have certainly gained a place in our constitutional arrangements. They are not, however, a substitute for the parliamentary process. Use of referendums does not mean, and must never mean, that detailed parliamentary debate can be short-circuited. If misused, a referendum can become an anti-parliamentary device and a tool of an over-mighty Government. I believe that pre-legislation referendums are such a misuse.

There is a basic problem with referendums that are held before the passage of legislation. If voters vote yes, it is either possible to amend substantially the draft Bill on which they have voted or it is not. If it is possible to amend the Bill, how will voters know what they are voting on? What if a legislative Parliament were provided

in a draft Bill for Scotland when people voted for it, but it was not a legislative Parliament when the Bill completed its passage? Would there have to be another referendum? Would there be a referendum to approve the amendments? When considering amendments to a Bill, how will Parliament know whether the voters in a referendum that has already been held would be agreeable to the amendment?

If one takes the other option and says that, once a draft Bill is approved in a referendum, Parliament must not seriously amend it, what will Parliament become? If detailed scrutiny of legislation does not take place at that stage, it will never take place. Parliamentary scrutiny of legislation, as we all understand it, will have broken down. That is the irrefutable logic that flows from the concept of a pre-legislation referendum: either voters will have to vote blindfolded or the essential functions of Parliament will be suppressed. The Secretary of State for Wales should have stuck to his instincts and stood up for those instincts, rather than allowing himself to be overruled by a bunch of spin doctors.

Mr. Robert MacLennan (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross): Will the right hon. Gentleman clarify the Conservative party's intentions on a referendum on the euro? Does he suggest that we should hold a referendum after the United Kingdom has signed up to the euro and after any necessary legislation may be in place, or does he suggest that we should have one before?

Mr. Hague: The hon. Gentleman cannot make that analogy. I am not disputing that a referendum should be held before a Scottish Parliament is established, which is his analogy. A referendum should be held before a Scottish Parliament is established, and a referendum should be held on a single currency, if the issue ever arose, before the United Kingdom entered it.

We are debating a quite different matter. We are debating whether a referendum should be held on proposals that may subsequently be changed or be held in a manner that would bully Parliament into approving, without proper debate, legislation that is proposed in a referendum. That is the point at issue.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr. David Trimble (Upper Bann): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Hague: I must must press on if I am to finish and allow other hon. Members to speak, but I will give way to the hon. Member for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble).

Mr. Trimble: Perhaps the right hon. Gentleman might like to consider the position in Northern Ireland, where I think that there has been bipartisan agreement. I am glad to see the Minister of State for Home Affairs and Devolution, Scottish Office, the hon. Member for Central Fife (Mr. McLeish) nodding. The position there has been very clearly understood. There is agreement between the parties that legislation will be passed by the House, which will then be put to the people in a referendum. In a Northern Ireland referendum, therefore, the Government's clear position is that a referendum will follow legislation.

Mr. Hague: The hon. Gentleman makes an extremely telling point, and I hope that the Secretary of State for

Wales, in his reply to this debate, will be able to explain the difference in approach between the Government's proposals for Northern Ireland and those for Scotland and Wales.

That is not our only objection to the referendum proposals. It is striking that the Government are not, so far, proposing any threshold of positive votes or overall turnout. A referendum with a low turnout could be a highly unsatisfactory method of changing the British constitution. I hope that the Secretary of State for Wales will tell us with what percentage of the population voting yes he would be happy. Would he be happy with a result in which 20 per cent. voted yes and slightly fewer voted no? Would that be a mandate on which to embark on a major and highly expensive change?

The proposals—

Mr. Dewar *rose*—

Mr. Hague: It is too late to ask questions of the Opposition. The right hon. Gentleman and his party are now the Government; it is our job to ask the questions and their job to answer. They have to get used to that.

Mr. Dewar *rose*—

Mr. Hague: Given that it is the right hon. Gentleman, I shall give way once more. I then hope to get on and thus allow other hon. Members to speak.

Mr. Dewar: I appreciate the fact that Governments have to answer. I also remember that on occasions the right hon. Gentleman used to ask me about my party's policy and intentions, so I hope that he will bear with me if I ask him to be a little more frank. Is he saying that the Conservatives will try to amend the Referendums (Scotland and Wales) Bill to impose a threshold? On what principle will that threshold operate? If he believes in thresholds, will he answer the question asked by the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Mr. Salmond) and confirm that a similar threshold will be applied to similar referendums in future if the Conservative party has its way?

Mr. Hague: Of course the Opposition will table a number of amendments to the Bill, and some will deal with the question of possible thresholds. However, it is a matter which the Government cannot ignore.

The proposals pose great dangers for the future of the United Kingdom. They are badly thought out, illogical and inconsistent. The proposed Scottish Parliament would create a direct conflict with the role of this House and, while Scottish Members of Parliament continued to determine policy in England, the existence of such a Parliament would amount to nothing less than the gerrymandering of our constitution.

The proposals for Wales amount to the most expensive roomful of hot air in recent political history. Frustrated and hamstrung, such an Assembly would find that its proceedings were either a total waste of time or would have little to do but apportion blame elsewhere and create conflict with other tiers of government. Its workings would be more likely to lead to fresh disillusionment with the political process than to ease any current dissatisfaction.

That such controversial and damaging proposals should be put to referendums is right; that they should be put to referendums in this way and according to this timetable is wrong. It is one thing to use a referendum to find out whether the people approve of a measure passed by Parliament, which they can judge in its entirety; it is quite another to use the device of a referendum to bully Members of Parliament to curtail debate while keeping the people guessing about what the precise and eventual consequences might be.

The constitutional contents of the Gracious Speech are one of its most worrying and dangerous elements. They are an element which the Opposition will firmly and robustly oppose. We shall expose the inadequacies, inconsistencies and flaws in the Government's constitutional proposals and take great pleasure in doing so because we believe that we are acting in the interests of the future of the United Kingdom and of this nation as a whole. The Government will have to have some answers to the questions that we are going to ask if they are to present a convincing case to the House.

10.32 am

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): It is surely common ground on this side of the House that if there is to be a Scottish Parliament it should have some chance of lasting in the form that a Scotland Act of 1997 or 1998 proposes.

Were we to pass legislation in the knowledge that what we proposed would soon turn into something different, we would be dishonest with ourselves and with the people.

To have a chance of lasting, a Scottish Parliament must have tax-raising powers; anything else would be a talking shop culminating in frustrated fiasco. Furthermore, my personal view, for what it is worth, is that a Scottish Parliament should be able to use its tax-raising powers from the day on which it is opened.

The White Paper must deal with many questions. Who exactly is to pay the tax? Will it be everyone domiciled in Scotland?

With regard to international tax, state borders provide the touchstone for separating the taxing rights of one fiscal regime from another, but where the border is, in essence, not real—as between Scotland and England—the imposition of tax by reference to the familiar tests of residence, domicile, source of income and location of trading operations is likely at best to be complex and expensive and at worst to be unfair and a major brake on doing business in Scotland.

Is there to be wholly arbitrary exemption for companies?

What is to be done about peripatetic pop stars, business men, or, indeed, Members of Parliament who spend more than half a year outside Scotland? We might be caught by a residency rule, but one can imagine the howls of outrage if we escaped.

What about an Englishman on temporary secondment to Scotland for six months? Would he be treated as a resident for a whole year or a payer of Scottish higher income tax on his English income?

In the UK, a new Scottish tax would be working against the framework of there being, in effect, a tax haven next door in England. I hope that that matter will also be dealt with in the White Paper.

[Mr. Tam Dalyell]

I thank the Secretary of State for dealing with the issue of the Barnett formula. Lord Joel Barnett is a friend of mine. I talked to him and I know that the matter is extremely complex. There should be a statement on the Barnett formula because some people in Scotland are deeply concerned, not least those who have to deal with resources for local councils.

What will be the consequences for the financial arrangements between Scotland and the rest of the UK if the Scots decide to raise income tax by 3p in the pound?

Will the Government of the UK be expected to put the same amount into Scotland as they would if income tax were the same there as in England and Wales?

If the Scots decided to cut taxes, would the English taxpayer be expected to make up the difference?

I hope also that the White Paper will address what John Lloyd in *Scotland on Sunday* called the Bury North question. A new Labour Member of Parliament has won the not overly rich Bury North seat from a sitting Conservative—in this case, David Chaytor won it from Alistair Burt. How can it be explained that Scotland should have more Members of Parliament than England and Wales, more public spending per head than England and Wales and, on top of that, a Parliament of its own?

I know that the figure is open to argument, but I understand that identifiable public spending in Scotland is £4,505 per head while it is £3,614 in England—a difference in Scotland's favour of 24.6 per cent. That will have to be addressed in the White Paper. There is no way of ducking it.

Before we leave the subject of money, is the Parliament to be paid for out of Scottish Office allocation or out of United Kingdom funds?

I listened to what my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said about mandates. My mandate was far more emphatically for more nurses in St. John's hospital, Livingston than for 129 politicians in Edinburgh.

I come now to the role of Scottish Members of Parliament and what, in deference to Madam Speaker, we might call the West Bromwich question. For how long can a Member of Parliament for West Bromwich accept a situation in which fewer than 55,000 people elect a Scottish Member of Parliament while more than 68,000 elect an English Member of Parliament, when the Scots have an Edinburgh Parliament of our own? Will the White Paper suggest that that situation can last in perpetuity?

I started my speech by saying that we had to talk about proposals that were likely and had a chance of lasting; otherwise, enormous sournesses will be created. Will the White Paper grasp the nettle and recommend a pro rata reduction in the number of Scottish seats to 59, or even to 45? When I was first elected to the House there were 12 Members of Parliament representing Northern Ireland, with the Stormont Parliament operating there. On that calculation, the appropriate figure for Scotland would be 45 Members of Parliament. The White Paper must address that honestly.

Mr. Trimble: I have a little point to make the issue even starker. Immediately before the establishment of the

Northern Ireland Parliament, more than 25 Members of Parliament were returned from that area: the representation of Northern Ireland was halved in 1921.

Mr. Dalyell: I used to discuss this issue with the late Rafton Pounder, Stratton Mills and others and I realise that there are complexities. All that I ask is that the White Paper to be produced by the Government whom I support should address the problem and not leave it unaddressed.

One day—not before I am kicking up the proverbial daisies, I hope—the Government of the day will not be allowed to tolerate a situation in which my successor and the other Member of Parliament for West Lothian, a by that time white-bearded Robin Cook, are still able to vote on housing, education and health in West Bromwich, but not in West Lothian. A Prime Minister who rightly sets such store by doing what is right in the long term cannot shrug off the problem by intoning:

"Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof."

In the current parliamentary arithmetic, the problem does not arise, but there will come a day—later rather than sooner, I hope—when it will arise. If we are talking about proposals that are likely or have a chance of lasting, now is the time to address the problem. The White Paper provides the opportunity to do so.

How will the White Paper address the problem of setting up a subordinate Parliament in a part—though only a part—of a kingdom which, above all, one wishes to keep united?

I confess to being the first person recently to have suggested a referendum on devolution. For this I was rebuked by my right hon. Friend the Member for Hamilton, South (Mr. Robertson), who called me "isolated in the party" and various ruderies. Never in a month of Sundays would I or did I suggest the current referendum proposal. If the referendum is to be on a White Paper, we must have time to see and digest that White Paper. If the White Paper is vague in any respect, the referendum will be on a pig in a poke.

Any Government with a colossal majority should be careful about assuming that a White Paper can go through both Houses unaltered in every respect. The referendum that some of us had in mind—and which, whatever happens, should still be held—is on the one meaningful and precise question that can be asked: "Do you approve of the Scotland Act 1998 as passed by Parliament?"

Will the Secretary of State explain to us in the wind-up the justification for a pre-legislative rather than a post-legislative referendum?

The question of who will be allowed to vote remains. England is affected, too, as is the position of Scots in England. In my view, Madam Speaker was right to say that assent has to be given on the Floor of the House. The devolution debate is being presented as a wholly Scottish matter, but it affects the United Kingdom as a whole.

10.46 am

Mr. Robert Macleinnan (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross): May I begin by expressing my immense satisfaction that the right hon. Member for Glasgow, Anniesland (Mr. Dewar) has assumed his important position as Secretary of State for Scotland? It is rare to speak of friendship for colleagues in the House, but I regard him as my oldest friend in this place and I could not have been more pleased by his appointment.

I welcome the measures foreshadowed in the Gracious Speech promising reforms of our constitution. They are important in themselves, but they are also important as the first steps in a much-needed process of modernisation to make our system of government fit for the tasks required of it by the British people.

Constitutional reform, being concerned with improving the system of government, is sometimes represented as being of less interest to the public than the ends of government, such as health, education, care of the elderly or housing. However, historically that is not a universal truth. Battles to extend the franchise and to reform the House of Lords secured centrality in past elections, when the voting public recognised that progress in attaining the fruits of good government was blocked by outdated constitutional provisions.

The election from which this country has just emerged is unusual in that, for the first time in modern British history, two of the major contesting parties—the Labour party and the Liberal Democrats—put forward not just a proposal to tackle a particularly offensive constitutional anomaly, such as that which animated two elections in 1910, but a critique of our system of government and a substantial agenda of reforms and remedies.

The securing by the two parties of 62 per cent. of the popular vote is as broad an affirmation as could be given by the British people of their acceptance of the need for fundamental constitutional reform. The former Prime Minister sought to ignite fears that the proposals would damage our democracy and the unity of the realm. The public forcefully rejected that claim.

This, then, is a Parliament entrusted with reform. The people have given us an unparalleled opportunity systematically to reconstruct our democracy and the opportunity has come just in time. There has of late been a marked deterioration of public confidence in our system. The standing of Parliament and parliamentarians is worryingly low. There has also been a decline in participation in the democratic process. The vote in this election was lower than in any since 1935. When people come to believe that they cannot change things through the ballot box, democrats should take notice.

In some parts of our country, there has also been an increasing sense of alienation from what has been presented by the outgoing Government as our national mind. The diversity of our country, which has made it possible for British citizens to feel loyalty to the several communities to which they belong, has been seriously threatened by the impositions of a centralising state.

In my view, an unwritten constitution can work only where there are agreed ground rules and conventions which are shared across the party political divide. Too often in recent years, those assumptions and conventions have been ignored or flouted. As a consequence, the case for a written constitution setting out the limits and responsibilities of public power has strengthened.

A written constitution is the avowed longer-term goal of the Liberal Democrats. We see it, however, not as an event consequent on the disruption of our constitutional system, but rather as the end point of a process which consolidates the achievements of systematic and deliberate reform. That reform must accord with the wishes of the British people to be citizens and not subjects. That reform must reflect in its distribution of power the very British sense of fair play, due proportion

and justice. That reform, through its step-by-step achievement, should increase the confidence of the British people that democracy can be made to work better—that it is not just the least bad system of government, but that it can provide an admirable civic framework to fulfil their aspirations which cannot be achieved by individual effort alone.

The Gracious Speech is the beginning of that deliberate process, and it is deliberate in contrast with so many of the constitutional changes wrought by the outgoing Conservative Administration. Those changes were never put to the public for approval and even now they have never been approved. I think of the abolition of the Greater London council and the emasculation of local government throughout the country. I recall the casuistry of the distinction drawn by the outgoing Government between ministerial accountability and ministerial responsibility—a ruse which did not convince the public that Ministers were at fault only if they chose to accept the blame. I think of the muddying of the distinction between the provision of Government information and the purveying at public expense of glossy party political advertising. Such abuses—very different in kind, but the examples are legion—are evidence of a coarsening of standards and the dangers of power unchecked by formal constitutional constraints.

When the country heaved a collective sigh of relief on 2 May, it came from a deep sense that the process of government itself had become indecent. The constitutional measures proposed for this Session are certainly those which merit priority. Nothing can be more important than seeking to give our citizens the opportunity to have their fundamental rights and freedoms protected in the courts of our country. The incorporation of the European convention on human rights into United Kingdom law is a long overdue step towards a British Bill of Rights.

The proposed legislation, agreed in the Scottish constitutional convention by a broad spectrum of civic representatives, to give Scotland its own Parliament is more than welcome. The intention to subject unaccountable Welsh administration to the oversight of an elected Assembly is also timely. The proposal to move to a directly elected strategic authority for London is not simply righting a great wrong done to our capital city, but is necessary to secure its proper governance and development. The Government's assertion of their commitment to openness and transparency will best be met by the passage of a freedom of information Bill at an early date.

These important measures were among those agreed by the joint committee that the right hon. Member for Livingston (Mr. Cook) and I chaired prior to the election. There remain a significant number of other agreed constitutional reforms on which legislation is not specifically proposed for this Session, but on which I hope that work will begin concurrently.

I mention in particular the avowed policy and intention of the Labour party to introduce a fair and proportional voting system—the regional list system—for the elections to the European Parliament in 1999. I hope that the Government will confirm that intention at an early date and signal it by an appropriate direction to the boundary commission.

Reform of the voting system for all elections in this country is an imperative need. In the recent election, it required roughly 32,000 votes to elect one Labour

[Mr. Robert MacLennan]

Member of Parliament, 58,000 votes to elect one Conservative Member of Parliament and 114,000 votes to elect one Liberal Democrat Member of Parliament. Perhaps the Conservative party deserved to lose every seat in Scotland and in Wales, but when the 17.5 per cent. who voted Conservative in Scotland and the 19.6 per cent. who voted Conservative in Wales lack a Member of Parliament it must be recognised that our deliberations in this place are distorted by an unfair electoral system.

Such a programme of reform as lies ahead will raise questions in the minds of those who have seen previous Labour Governments' proposals for constitutional reform flounder in the shoals of current parliamentary procedures. Constitutional measures must be built to last; that is why they should not only have the broadest possible cross-party support but be subject to deliberate scrutiny. The current procedures of this House are not apt for that purpose as they go beyond protecting the rights of minorities to be heard and have been shown to empower a minority to foil the intentions of the majority. In my clear recollection, that is what happened to the late Dick Crossman's proposals for reform of the House of Lords in the 1960s. Majorities have their rights, too.

Mr. Dalyell: What really happened was that the Cabinet changed their mind.

Mr. MacLennan: That happened after 200 sittings of this Chamber which, even by the standards of constitutional debate, seemed excessive to those of us who were here.

In the Gracious Speech, the Government commit themselves to the programming of House of Commons business to ensure a more effective scrutiny of Bills and better use of Members' time. That is something which we can certainly welcome. Such scrutiny is required for all Bills, but the current procedures for constitutional Bills are particularly unsatisfactory.

I was also glad to note the final undertaking of the Gracious Speech indicating the Government's intention to establish a new Select Committee to look at ways in which to make parliamentary procedure more effective and efficient. I hope that that Committee will be established soon and that, as a matter of priority, it will be invited to consider the handling of constitutional Bills.

In my early years in the House, all clauses of Finance Bills were considered on the Floor of this Chamber. That was not sensible and the rules were changed by the House.

When this Parliament reaches its final term, I hope that it will have enacted in full the proposals of the Joint Committee on Constitutional Reform which I had the honour to sign on behalf of my party. If it does, I believe that it will have helped greatly to restore our democracy and bring power closer to the people. In that task, which I believe is well begun in the Gracious Speech, the Government can count on the support of my right hon. and hon. Friends.

10.59 am

Mrs. Ann Cryer (Keighley): This is a traumatic occasion for me, and I hope that the House will appreciate that there will be a certain omission from my speech. However, I am grateful to be called to speak.

I am more than pleased to be here representing Keighley and Ilkley in West Yorkshire; in fact, I am absolutely delighted. My unique constituency, of which I am extremely fond and proud, lies in the beautiful valleys of the Wharfe and Aire and its tributary, the Worth, which benefits from being served by a magnificent steam railway society of which I have the honour to be vice-president.

Surrounded on all sides by the wonderful backdrop of the Pennines, it is a diverse constituency—from soft green valleys to rugged moorland, from the leafy spa town of Ilkley and its much sung about moor to bustling industrial Keighley, which still has many engineering workshops and textile mills, not forgetting our world famous Bronte literary shrine at Haworth.

The massive development of the Jubilee line extension close to this place has a bearing on industrial Keighley, in that one of our larger employers, Orenstein and Koppel, is supplying the escalators. It is the largest single order for escalators ever placed world wide. Bearing in mind the successes of the company, I am pleased to note that the Gracious Speech included a commitment to encouraging investment in industry, skills, infrastructure and new technologies. I look forward to a move from short-term profitability and towards long-term investment in research and development, in improved plant and machinery and, above all, in our most valuable asset, our people, too many of whom in Keighley have been unemployed for far too long.

I have an abiding interest in early years education, having served on two first schools' governing bodies for many years. I therefore welcome the much-needed Government commitment to reduce class sizes in first and primary schools. I would also welcome Government assistance for schools in my constituency towards much-needed repairs, rebuilding and the overdue replacement of portakabins.

The Gracious Speech also announced measures to enable capital receipts from council house sales to be invested in house building and renovation. That will be a much more useful measure than the previous Government's inflated view of the need for large numbers of expensive homes on highly profitable green-field sites. I am in sympathy with the view of many of my constituents that erosion of the green belt in the Keighley constituency has gone far enough and should be halted and that the highly unpopular Bradford unitary development plan should be amended.

I also welcome the Government's commitment to a freedom of information Bill and trust that the period of consultation will not be too lengthy.

I congratulate the Government on their decision to incorporate in United Kingdom law the main provisions of the European convention on human rights. I note also with great pleasure that the Gracious Speech includes a commitment to prioritise the promotion of human rights world wide. I trust that that commitment will extend not only to the Muslims in Kashmir but to the long-suffering women in Afghanistan.

In keeping with the traditions of the House, I mention that my predecessor, along with other candidates in the Keighley election, fought a dignified and courteous campaign. I acknowledge their contribution in what could have become a much more trying situation.

Before closing, I should like to pay a warm tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn) and to my hon. Friends the Members for Bolsover (Mr. Skinner) and for Halifax (Mrs. Mahon) and to the previous Member for Bradford, West. Without their encouragement and support two years ago, I doubt very much whether I would be standing here today.

Finally, I wish to pay tribute to the electors of Keighley who have put their faith in myself and my party. Over the next five years, I hope to do all in my power to justify that trust.

11.4 am

Sir Nicholas Lyell (North-East Bedfordshire): I congratulate you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, on your appointment and wish you a long and happy period in office. I also congratulate the Opposition on their great victory in the general election and the Secretaries of State for Scotland and for Wales on their appointments.

I also congratulate the hon. Member for Keighley (Mrs. Cryer) on her maiden speech. She bears a famous parliamentary name, as she is the widow of Bob Cryer. Although I can fairly say that Bob Cryer and I could hardly find a single political subject on which we agreed, I respected him greatly. No one worked harder in Parliament. He kept us up night after night to speak on money resolutions and the hon. Member for Bolsover (Mr. Skinner) was usually sitting beside him. He was a tremendous parliamentarian. The hon. Lady has the distinction of being not only the widow of a Member of Parliament, a Member of Parliament herself, but the mother of the new Member for Hornchurch (Mr. Cryer). That must be a formidable parliamentary first. She made a dignified speech and we are honoured to welcome her to the House.

The hon. Lady mourns Bob Cryer; in parliamentary terms, we mourn the loss of many excellent colleagues. We know that our duty is to refresh and rebuild our party and thereby to assist the return as legislators of as many of them as possible.

We are told that there has been a great change in the Labour party. The hon. Lady will not take it amiss if I say that at least the stable from which she comes is not entirely that of the Prime Minister's so-called one-nation Labour party. In so far as new Labour has changed, we welcome that change. It is part of our success over 18 years that we did a good deal to force and bring about that change. I hope that change is real. We can also claim that we have left a solid inheritance, a stable and flourishing economy.

Before I turn to the constitution, as the words "one nation" have such a deep tradition going back to Disraeli, it is worth mentioning what it means to be a one-nation Conservative, as I consider myself to be. The words "opportunity for all" have been adopted by the Labour party. In that we can agree, as they belong to us and to one-nation Conservatism. It means helping people to help themselves, private enterprise, personal ownership, individual liberty, not "stakeholding" but a real stake for individuals in their nation, real ownership and a truly pluralist society. By achieving that in the past 18 years, to a great extent—but never enough—we have released the energies of the people of the United Kingdom to create the wealth to improve our public services and help those in real need.

Yesterday, we discussed the need to create jobs for young people. That way of releasing energy helped to create 900,000 new jobs in the past five years. The Labour Government are not on the right route if they think that things can fall from the trees. They cannot create real jobs in the long term by windfalls and the idea that they can win the electorate, the election or recovery for the country by windfall taxes is a sincere but mistaken notion. We shall return to those wider political issues in future debates. Today, we debate the constitution; when one makes constitutional change, there is nothing more important than that it is carefully thought through.

I intend to speak briefly on devolution and say a few words about the incorporation of the European convention on human rights. I shall also say a few words about the reform of the House of Lords. I am glad that the Secretary of State for Scotland mentioned it in his speech. As I was watching proceedings in the other place on the television monitor, I noticed that the Lord Privy Seal said specifically that the subject would be returned to later in this Parliament. I shall develop the point further, but, given that it is to happen "later in this Parliament", it must be unacceptable that the Government should seek to destroy substantially what currently exists without putting forward to the nation and both Houses what they intend to put in its place. I shall return to that theme.

On devolution, I speak as someone who is half Scots. My father comes from Angus. He was born, bred and educated in Scotland and left only at the age of 19. The Government have their majority and I suspect that they will win their referendum in whatever form it takes. I hope that they will answer the very pertinent questions asked by my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague) before they are allowed to do so, although I suspect that they will find that difficult. If a devolved Scottish Parliament comes into being, we, as Conservatives, will of course play our part in it. I believe that it will help us to rebuild our presence in Scotland, as I am confident we shall do.

I want to focus principally on the European convention on human rights and the question of its incorporation. Incorporation is likely to happen during this Parliament, too. There is no doubt that there is a majority in favour of it in another place. Nor is it a party political issue; there is cross-party support for it in different ways. My noble Friend Lord Alexander of Weedon and my friend, Sir Leon Brittan, are well known as proponents of it. Nor is it controversial within the different wings of my party. Our late-lamented colleague, Sir Ivan Lawrence, was a strong proponent of it, although he would have declared himself to be firmly on the Euro-sceptic wing of the party. We must therefore address the subject extremely carefully, and I have sought to do so in a number of speeches and debates outside the House—we did not regard it as right to debate the matter in the House—over the years.

We must recognise that, although incorporation has pros and cons—one of the pros would be the benefit of the involvement of our judges and therefore the introduction of our tradition running through to Strasbourg—it can have far-reaching effects. Also, proponents of it have often overstated or misstated their case—I am sure not deliberately.

I would like to clear two myths out of the way. The first is that Britain is the wicked man of Europe in such a context—that somehow we have a worse record than

[Sir Nicholas Lyell]

the now 33 member nations of the Council of Europe. That is not true. I invite Ministers to look at written answers on the matter. It is perfectly plain that, if one considers actions per 100,000 of population, and takes account of population size and the length of time that Britain has given the right of individual petition, this country's record, far from being near the bottom, is near the top, near the best. We are a country which believes in the rule of law and our record is thoroughly creditable. I am not against our signing up to the convention. I believe that in a civilised world we have a duty to play our part.

The other myth is that, if we incorporate, we shall somehow reduce the number of cases that go to Strasbourg and somehow cut costs. I very much doubt whether that is so. We have a highly sophisticated legal profession in this country. Indeed, I must declare an interest. My friends in the profession, in the most honourable sense, are rubbing their hands at the thought of widening their practices in European convention work. That work is already growing greatly. Given the growth in judicial review, I have no doubt that we shall see a vast growth in European convention work.

Against that background, how should we view Labour's contention in the recent pamphlet published by the Secretary of State for the Home Department, entitled "Bringing Rights Home", which says confidently on page 1 that incorporation would

"cut costs, save time and give power back to the British courts"?

Giving power back to the British courts is a complete historical anomaly. One has to go back to early Stuart times before one finds a time when British courts had the power to strike down a statute—yet that is what will be proposed if we incorporate.

Labour has issued a consultation document, to which I have referred, which is in marked contrast to its failure to issue one in relation to reform of the House of Lords. There is plenty of time to do that too, and I hope that it will.

"Bringing Rights Home" seems to assume that, if our courts find primary legislation to be in breach of the convention, rather than striking it down in the court then and there, they will make a declaration to that effect, and the domestic courts will have no power to give any other remedy and must wait for Parliament to change the law. I should like to pass a bouquet to the Government in that respect. I think that that idea is quite imaginative and should be looked at extremely carefully. It will meet strong opposition from the most long-standing proponents of change.

Lord Lester of Herne Hill—again, an old friend—who is respected and well known as, perhaps, the leading proponent in this matter, will castigate such a suggestion. He has argued that the convention should be incorporated in our law like the treaty of Rome; that it should immediately become part of our domestic law; that it should require all to comply with it; and that it should enable, indeed require, our courts to strike down even any primary statute that is not in conformity with it, whether that statute had been passed before or after the act of incorporation. I warn the House that that is a huge power. It is also virtually certain to bring our judiciary

significantly into the political arena, for many of the provisions in the convention, or rather the qualifications to the fundamental rights, are highly political.

Mr. MacLennan: The right hon. and learned Gentleman may have overlooked the most recent Bill that my noble Friend Lord Lester introduced in the House of Lords, which did not go so far as the right hon. and learned Gentleman is suggesting in seeking to strike down primary legislation by incorporation. The Bill received widespread support among the Law Lords who spoke in the debate.

Sir Nicholas Lyell: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that information. I have in fact looked extremely carefully at that Bill and compared it with the other one. A paper in the second edition of the new magazine on European human rights law deals with the matter. I am afraid that I must ask the hon. Gentleman to look more carefully at the issue. Although Lord Lester's new Bill cuts out the express terms of his earlier Bill, which would enable primary legislation to be struck down, it still contains terms that, in my view, require and can only be construed as requiring, courts to do exactly the same thing. Indeed, Lord Lester wrote an article in *The Times* only the day before yesterday, saying that that is the power he believed the courts should have. My warning is therefore a real one.

I was making the point that incorporation would bring judges into the political arena. One prime article of the convention, article 8, which says that everyone has the right to respect for his private and family life, his home and his correspondence, is something with which everyone would agree. Instantly, however, one moves to the qualifications to the exercise of that right, which are: "except such as is in accordance with law and is necessary in a democratic society"—

this is the important bit—

"in the interests of national security, public safety or the economic well being of the country, for the prevention of disorder or crime, for the protection of health or morals, or the protection of the rights and freedoms of others."

Every one of those qualifications is a highly political concept.

The counter-argument is that it is better to have some input from our judiciary than simply to leave matters to the Strasbourg judiciary. I acknowledge the force of that counter-argument. The danger is also that it will cut out this House and the other place—our Parliament—and that we shall find our law being made by a judiciary that has been forced, by incorporation legislation passed by this House, to take on a quasi-legislative role. Furthermore, that quasi-legislative role, which the courts will fulfil, will be carried out not merely according to the notions of our own judiciary, who are brought up in and understand our country, but in accordance with the views of judges from some 33 nations. To quote another leading authority, the convention

"must be interpreted in an objective and dynamic manner, taking into account social conditions and developments; the ideas and conditions prevailing at the time the treaty was drafted retaining hardly any continuing validity."

A great "acquis", to use a word that infuriates my Euro-sceptic friends, is building up on European convention law. It depends on the views of judges from

33 member states throughout Europe, including parts of eastern Europe. Those views will potentially be forced on us without any opportunity for debate. I cast my bouquet to those on the Government Benches because, although I do not fully understand what is being said in "Bringing Rights Home" and it deserves further thought, the consultation document seems to assume that there will be a place for this House and the other place in the formulation of any modification to our law that might be required following an application of the convention by our courts. That is sensible. I speak personally, from the Back Benches, and I do not commit my party, but we should consider that suggestion seriously.

A further warning is needed. We are handing responsibility to the judiciary in accordance with a body of law that we did not make. If we lose in our own courts all the way up to the House of Lords, my understanding is that the Crown—the Government of this country—cannot take an appeal to Strasbourg; only an applicant can take a case to Strasbourg. I should be grateful if the Secretary of State for Wales would take advice on that point and address it when he winds up. We would also have no democratic way to change the law once it was thus fixed, because no mechanism exists for the 33 countries—possibly 41 by the time the legislation reaches the statute books—to alter it democratically.

I am not opposed to our membership of the convention and I believe that, with one or two unfortunate exceptions, it has been said to work, thanks to the leadership and wisdom of the senior judges. I commend particularly the president of the European Court of Human Rights, Judge Rysdøl, who has shown immense wisdom in recognising the importance of a wide margin of appreciation for member states. However, real dangers must be addressed and real questions must be answered before we incorporate the convention in our domestic law.

Before I conclude, I return to the subject of the House of Lords. The same need for careful thought applies to the Government's proposals for reform of the House of Lords. I say, with all the force and belief at my command, that it is unacceptable to propose to change the present system, by abolishing the rights of hereditary peers, without first providing a Bill to put something in its place. I see the Secretary of State for Scotland frowning and shaking his head mildly—I am glad that he is shaking it only mildly. We have time for thought, and we need thought on the subject. The Government have a responsibility to propose an alternative system.

Why is this issue important? The House of Lords has two key functions. First, it has an important role as a revising Chamber. Secondly, and even more important, there is its role as a constitutional anchor. We had a majority less than 10 years ago—it is still less than 10 years ago—of 144 and the Government now have a majority of 180. In the case of a large majority for the Government, the restraint provided by the second Chamber, in whatever form, is essential. It may have been inconvenient to us 10 years ago and it may be inconvenient to the Government in the coming years, but it is a necessary and proper discipline.

I strongly support the first-past-the-post principle for this Chamber. It gives a decisive result and the gearing effects, win or lose, mean that the views of the people are well reflected here. The Government of the day can normally govern effectively with a working majority.

The hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Mr. MacLennan) is smiling at me. I know that he disagrees and that he would like a German-style system in which his party would always be in the middle and part of government. I can think of nothing less democratic, but I will not get into that wider debate now.

It would be unacceptable and deeply dangerous to our constitution for a similar swing to occur in the second Chamber, whatever form it took. Those who sit there, whether by appointment, hereditary right, some future form of election or some combination of the three, must be there for a sufficiently long time to show real personal independence. They must be able to sit on the Cross Benches; to vote according to their consciences, whether they support the Government or the Opposition of the day; to be comparatively off-hand about whipping; and to do what they believe to be right. Coupled with the convention that the second chamber leaves the Government of the day to implement their broad policies, subject to improvement, that independence has been one of the huge strengths of our constitution. I do not say what should replace the present chamber, if the rights of hereditary peers are abolished, but I reiterate that to destroy a system that works without stating what would be put in its place would be profoundly wrong.

11.27 am

Mr. Austin Mitchell (Great Grimsby): I echo whole-heartedly the remarks of the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Bedfordshire (Sir N. Lyell) about the charming speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley (Mrs. Cryer). It was a moving occasion for those, including myself, who grew up with Bob Cryer in Shipley to see her speaking as his successor. It is also welcome to see his son here as a Member of Parliament. My hon. Friend's speech was charming and it moved us all. It is, I am sure, an augury of an effective career in Parliament, taking up where Bob left off.

I am today breaking the habit of a parliamentary lifetime by participating in an "address and reply" debate. I have never done so before, because I have always seen such debates as an exchange of pompous platitudes. I wish to take part today, because it is a celebration of a revolution that has taken place in this country. The revolution was not of the Labour party's making. Indeed, I confess that I found our manifesto minimalist and cautious, and I said so before it was published. The revolution was made by the people who wanted, and achieved, a decisive rejection of a Government who had failed.

The people threw out a Government who had turned negative and sour over the years and become nattering nabobs of negativism, as a former Vice-President of the United States called the media. The previous Government turned a long, petty-minded sulk into a system of government. The people took the weight of that failed Government off their backs, and by so doing, they removed the block to change that that Government represented. It was a liberation carried through by the people, boosted by the vision offered by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, who inspired a fairly timid Labour party campaign with the vision and enthusiasm that he projected.

As this is confession time, I admit that I went away shortly after the election. I did not acquire this tan in Cleethorpes, although the basis of it was laid canvassing

[*Mr. Austin Mitchell*]

in Cleethorpes. I went away because it seemed pointless to me to sit for 10 days while the Government were being formed, waiting for the telephone not to ring. I came back to find that I am indeed part of an excluded generation—the rising-60s. To paraphrase Wordsworth in “The Prelude”: “Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive—but to be old was something of a disadvantage.” That is the situation in which I find myself.

None the less, I rejoice in the revolution that is being carried through. I shall, of course, be a participant in furthering that revolution in the House of Commons. We are living through an exciting period, and it is exciting to see how many of the boot boys of negativism who used to occupy the Government Benches have been swept away. It is exciting to see that those who talked so much rubbish about economics and policy for so long have either gone or been humbled, and now have to sing a different song—the querulous song sung by the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague), the former Secretary of State for Wales, whose attack on our devolution proposals was nothing but a list. Indeed, it was a list of lists, consisting of nit-picking attempts to pick holes in those proposals.

It is wonderful to see a new start, a new mood and a sweeping away of the gloom and failure. This is a honeymoon, but a honeymoon that will last. Labour Governments usually have longer honeymoons than Conservative Governments. In 1979 the honeymoon lasted only nine weeks before the polls turned sour, whereas in 1964 our honeymoon lasted two years, as it did in 1974. This honeymoon will be even longer, because we are carrying through the wish of the people of this country for change in the system.

That is especially true in the constitutional sphere, and on the constitutional question our manifesto was at its most radical. Some of us might want to go further, but we have to begin somewhere, and we are making a powerful beginning now.

Government had become so centralised, and executive power so strongly misused by the previous Government, that it had been abused. It is characteristic of this country, with its strong executive government, that the Prime Minister and Government of the day drive a steamroller through the House of Commons. In opposition, all that one can do—it is what we have been doing for 18 years—is to heckle that steamroller.

When Baroness Thatcher drove that steamroller, she drove it straight, callously and brutally. When her successor, the right hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major), drove it, it wandered around the countryside and we got a friendly, amiable grin from the deck—but it was a steamroller none the less.

It is time to take power, power that has been abused, from the Government and to spread it round among the people. That is what we shall do. It is extraordinary to see a party that has abused constitutional power so long and so vigorously, and been so radical in its deformation of the constitution, now presenting the image of being stand-pat opponents of change.

A radical party is suddenly reverting to traditional conservatism—but only on the constitution. It says, “Do nothing; ask your grandmother—or rather, ask your grandfather in the House of Lords—about the

constitution.” But the people want change in the system, and they will get change. They want to be heard; they want to be involved. That is the basis of our constitutional changes.

Those changes mean bringing government closer to the people, and not only in Scotland and Wales. I want government to be brought closer to the English regions, too. The case for regional government in Yorkshire and Humberside is as strong as that in Scotland and Wales. The opinion surveys by the Kilbrandon commission during the previous review of the constitution showed in Yorkshire and Humberside, in the north-east as well as in the north-west, the same feeling of distance and alienation from central Government, and of neglect by them, as characterised Scotland.

Our case is strong, and it will become stronger when we see the effects of devolution in Scotland and Wales. As people there become energised by having more power over their own destiny, they will become formidable competitors in development, in attracting foot-loose industry and in providing a dynamic to their system, which will make the local government and the people in Yorkshire and Humberside want the same for our people. We must be there in the queue and our place must be guaranteed.

That is the major part of constitutional reform, and that to which we have devoted most of our attention today. However, there are others. Constitutional reform also means incorporating the European convention on human rights into the system in this country. I am delighted to see that.

I was one of only three Labour Members of Parliament who voted for a private Member's Bill to incorporate the convention on human rights—I think that that was in 1984—when the word went out from the shadow Cabinet that Labour Members should abstain or vote against. The Bill was nearly carried, and it would have been carried with Labour support. As one of those three Members, I am pleased to be still here to welcome the fact that we shall now incorporate the European convention.

Constitutional reform also means proportional representation. I see around me in the Chamber several colleagues and friends who are strong advocates of proportional representation, as I am. It is interesting to hear arguments for the first-past-the-post system being offered by the Conservative party, which has benefited from that system for nearly 20 years. For 18 years, we have had dictatorship by the minority, with most people voting against the Conservative Government, who none the less had overwhelming power and executive control.

Sir Nicholas Lyell: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman is about to answer this question in his next few words, but as he has 44 per cent. of the vote, I hope that he will remember that he is in a minority position as against 56 per cent. Perhaps he will develop his argument.

Mr. Mitchell: Personally, I have far more than 44 per cent. of the vote, I am pleased to say.

If the Conservative party intends to stick to its opposition to proportional representation, in the minority position into which first-past-the-post has put it, that can be for no other reason than that it hopes to get power on the same minority basis again in future, and to abuse it in the same way. That is not what the people want.

The people want the Government who represent them and their wishes to reflect in the party strength in the House of Commons their votes for parties in the same proportion. That will come, because first we shall have the commission to agree on an alternative system, and then we shall have a referendum. I am convinced that that will change the first-past-the-post system, because people are fed up with government by embattled minority, which we have had for the past 20 years.

The people want a Government who listen. They want the same influence that the New Zealand electorate now have upon the system there. We are moving towards proportional representation, which would be a major means of freeing up our system.

Constitutional reform means open government. It means reform of the procedures of this place too, to give the people much more influence and impact on our legislation. I served on the Hansard Society's commission on the legislative process, and we recommended a legislative process very like the one that has now been developed in New Zealand.

Bills are introduced and then advertised, and a Committee receives representations from the people, interested parties and all groups concerned. It hears all their views. That avoids what happens in this country, when organisations come in at the last minute, when legislation is being finalised in Committee and say, "This is terrible. We want something done about it."

The New Zealand system avoids such last-minute discovery and involves the people. It also involves Members of Parliament in shaping legislation. That is important, with a majority as large as ours. Members of Parliament must have a more useful role in the system. If we are to be kept off the streets and away from malignancy—if I may make a joke about the large number of Labour Members—we must be usefully employed here rather than left milling around and regarded as mere brute votes at the disposal of the Whips. We have a higher dignity and importance than that, and that must be realised as part of the process of constitutional reform.

Constitutional reform involves handing over powers to the people—an empowered people. But, to conclude on a note of dissent, it does not involve handing supreme power to the Governor of the Bank of England to use in his own unaccountable fashion, to determine the economic interests of this country on behalf of the financial interests in the City, which he represents. The Labour party national executive, in its old, unregenerate days—in its old good days, some of us might say—said that whoever controlled monetary policy controlled the economic destiny of the nation. That is indeed true. I was horrified to find that the Governor of the Bank of England, Mr. Eddie George, was now in supreme power. I did not even know that he was standing at the election. I thought that I was standing and that the Labour party was. I did not know that Eddie George was contesting the election and had won it.

The change will mean that interest rates are marginally higher, when they have been too high for too long and need to come down. It will mean that the pound will be higher than it needs to be for the interests of competitive manufacturing and exports, when the pound is too high and needs to come down. A modern Government have only two weapons of economic management—the fiscal and the monetary. If we are not to increase tax rates, as we

are committed not to do, we must have greater freedom to use the monetary weapon to manage the destiny of our country and achieve the growth on which everything in Labour's policy depends.

I do not want to face the dichotomy that we faced at the election. The national campaign was about hypotheticals. It was about Europe, trust, honesty and sleaze. I was interested to see the new hon. Member for Tatton (Mr. Bell) sitting in his isolation ward earlier. He is not here now to listen to my support for his stance. The campaign on the ground was about grievances, problems and difficulties. It was about the grumbles of the electorate, who faced cuts in the health service, delays in operations, cancelled appointments, increasing rolls in schools and the meanness of the benefits system. Those are the characteristics of a mean society, which has been bedevilled by cuts and economies for 18 years.

Local government, the health service and social services need more money and cannot face and must not be asked to face another round of cuts such as the long round of cuts under the outgoing Government. That was wasting by anorexia. [HON. MEMBERS: "Ah."] That is why it is essential to expand the economy, so that Labour does not follow in the footsteps of the folly that has made local government less effective and less popular and unable to advance the cause of its people.

The process of building socialism began straight after the election. Socialism is not only a process of empowerment of the people such as we shall provide through our constitutional reforms, to give people the platform of rights and powers from which to control their own destiny and influence the Government, but a process of enrichment and betterment. We must provide jobs because part of that platform is jobs—people's ability to control their economic destiny as well as their political destiny. Those two processes go hand in hand. I am delighted that we are embarking so vigorously and effectively on the empowerment process, but we must embark on the enrichment process as well. Without one, the other fails. We have not waited 18 years in opposition to begin rolling, as we are now rolling, that Sisyphean stone back up the hill where it belongs and advance the cause of the people, to fail on the one front while succeeding on the other.

11.42 am

Mr. Peter Brooke (Cities of London and Westminster): Mr. Deputy Speaker, I join others in congratulating you on having taken your office. It is a great pleasure to see you wearing a tie in some way related to cricket so early in your time in the Chair.

It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Mr. Mitchell). He and I entered the House at by-elections within months of each other. We are both of us old lags. I have no doubt that I shall demonstrate that in my speech in the same way as he has just demonstrated it in his.

I join the hon. Gentleman in congratulating the hon. Member for Keighley (Mrs. Cryer). I played cricket for the Lords and Commons with her husband, who was in the great tradition of Yorkshire slow left-arm bowlers and, in that capacity, possessed a perfect but nagging length, which he then transferred into parliamentary affairs. It is a pleasure that she should speak so early in our deliberations in the House, because it increases the number of times that we shall hear her in the rest of the Parliament, to which we already look forward.

[Mr. Peter Brooke]

There have been signs in this week-long debate on the Queen's Speech that hangover and fatigue are overtaking the Government Benches. Even the Prime Minister's speech was described by a commentator as lacklustre. The Secretary of State for Scotland was a lively exception and my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague) transformed the debate by the quality of his speech. In addressing the House as he did, he brought it home to me that the constitutional cheese that is being put in front of us owes less to Caerphilly than to Gruyère—the country of origin of which is addicted to referendums. I look forward more than I expected as I got up this morning to the reply by the Secretary of State for Wales, the right hon. Member for Caerphilly (Mr. Davies).

In the early years of the 1950s, in a particular week, *The Times* on the Monday referred to the publication of the collected poems of the distinguished American poet Wallace Stevens, Faber and Faber, 2 guineas. On Tuesday, it reported with regret the death of Mr. Wallace Stevens. On Friday, the leading article in the *Times Literary Supplement* began with the words, "This has been a good year for Mr. Wallace Stevens." It has been a rather less good year for the Conservative party. Conversely, since 1 May, a bright morning has been visible for the Labour party.

I am one of the eight survivors in this House of the very first Administration of my noble Friend Lady Thatcher. I can remember exactly what it was like. I do not begrudge anyone in the new Administration a single moment of the bright joy that the Labour party is enjoying. I echo the quotation that the hon. Member for Great Grimsby gave from Wordsworth. One of the most vivid features of government that I recall is the headiness with which one took unpopular and radical decisions and the long delay that then elapsed before one had to introduce them. When they were exceeding unpopular, they were disagreeable and one forgot the headiness with which they were embarked upon.

I have a particular personal reason for wishing the new Administration well. I have only once taken part in a lawsuit, at an industrial tribunal. Our counsel was the present Lord Chancellor and the pupil who accompanied him throughout the case was the present Prime Minister. Given my satisfaction as their client on that occasion, it would be churlish of me to deny them as a citizen my good wishes for the task on which they have set out.

The people have spoken. The battle of Isandlwana is over and the defence of the mission station at Rorke's Drift is about to begin. At the heart of that defence will be the adherence to principle that has been at the heart of the Conservative party for the past 300 years, not least on the constitution. But in due course, as at Rorke's Drift, I hope that we shall mount periodic guerrilla forays into enemy territory, ever mindful of the comment at the café tables in Athens in 1945 when the news of the British election results arrived to the effect, "Poor old chap, fancy having to take to the hills at his age." I expect us to be a nimble, probing and, I hope, stylish Opposition. Incidentally, contrary to some rather lazy calculation in the media, 33 of us in my party have had experience of opposition before.

The Queen's Speech contains uncontroversial measures that are indistinguishable from the thinking of the previous Government. That is the scale of the

Conservative party's achievement in the past 22 years, even if most of the pledges on the Deputy Prime Minister's famous card were somewhat mouselike. I have listened to the verdicts of experts in the various fields—"Fairly limited," said one, "Modest," said another. In the most damning indictment of all, "Frankly pathetic," said the chairman of the British Medical Association.

The pledges were soundbites—the intellectual underpinning for a poster campaign that seemed to promise so much more—but they were simple enough to remember, even for the candidate who uttered that memorably banal response to a journalist, "I am not an individual. You must speak to Millbank."

The principal feature of the Queen's Speech, which distinguishes it from the policies of the other main party, is the proposals on the constitution, which is the subject of today's debate. The debate is too short and crowded to dissect each of the Government's constitutional proposals this morning, but I am conscious that I shall have serial opportunities to examine them again in the future. Each proposal is, however, surrounded by a central paradox. The Government's logic is that they wish to devolve, delegate and decentralise, yet they are themselves a new model army that holds all power to its centre. Indeed, direct from the ducking ponds of Hartlepool, they come equipped with their own witch-finder general.

There is a critical contradiction in those emphases, which carry all the risks of schizophrenia. I have a personal bias towards delegation. Perhaps I belong to an older strand in Conservative thinking, born partly of genetics, which would ascribe powers to local government more than has recently prevailed, but I am not plagued in my own thinking by the intellectual, emotional fault line that runs through the heart of this Government, which I noticed was caught by Garland in *The Daily Telegraph* yesterday when he chose the image of the glacier or the geological rift.

My own image is more pastoral. I have been only once to Negril, at the far end of Jamaica, where Nelson's 18th-century fleet used to gather in the bay. Latterly, it has become a resort. When I was there a quarter of a century ago, it was a fishing village on a beach, to the right of the road from Montego Bay to Ian Fleming's Savannah le Mare. The road was narrow, and to its left the cartographers had filled a large open space with those tufts which, on battlefield maps, indicate marshes. The cartographers had, however, also given the area a name: it was simply called The Great Morass.

It is off the narrow road of sensible government and into this great morass that the Government are marching their own troops and this Parliament, with the Secretary of State for Scotland at their head. He carries a particular responsibility for this venture, for in the debate on the constitution shortly before the election, in response to an intervention by my hon. Friend the Member for South Staffordshire (Sir P. Cormack), it was out of his hurried words to the then Leader of the Opposition that sprang the weasel words of a short cut across the great morass, by taking the Committee stages of constitutional measures in Committee rather than on the Floor of the House. The House knows me as a mild-mannered man, but that way lies tyranny.

I agree that the Government are operating in this regard behind a smokescreen of opaque language, but what Dr. Watson would have called "The Case of the

Prime Minister's Questions" is profoundly discouraging. The Government's defence of the latter episode yesterday was leaden-footed and broken-backed, and if such batting continues, we shall not win the Ashes this summer.

I hope that wiser counsels prevail before the Secretary of State for Scotland embarks on his short cut across the morass. He has, I acknowledge, done a fair job of repairing the Prime Minister's parish council gaffe, but he still has around his neck the albatross of the Prime Minister's remarks about Scottish tax intentions, which portrayed more vividly than anything else the central fault line of the Government, to which I referred earlier. In the constitutional debate to which I referred, the present Prime Minister did not answer the West Lothian question either.

I shall allude to one other feature of the Government's constitutional policies: the plethora of envisaged referendums. Unlike most of the House, I have lived in Switzerland in my day. I have always found mildly disturbing the enthusiasm of my more Euro-sceptic friends on these Benches—in seeking to avoid further continental entanglements—for the concept of referendums, which have always seemed to me profoundly continental devices wholly antithetical to seven centuries of parliamentary government in this House. Of course they have their place, but the present Government seem to be making them a substitute for careful thought and reasoned debate.

The debate on London lies a little further ahead, but I am constantly bombarded in the media by expressions of the passion of Londoners for a strategic authority, as evidenced by opinion polls. In the glorious weather in April, I called on one in 10 of my constituents in their homes, during 120 hours of canvassing. I must tell the House that, in a gallimaufry of agreeable conversations on the doorstep, the need for a strategic authority for London never once fell from the lips of one of my electors, let alone their enthusiasm for it.

What does surprise me, given Labour's refrain over the 11 years since the demise of the Greater London council, is how little detailed preparation has been done and vouchsafed to us on the London proposals, but now that the civil service is available, no doubt, as Alec Douglas Home once said in response to a question on VAT, a lot of clever chaps are thinking about it.

We are to be ruled by Puritans, although I am not at all confident that the Protector would have approved of anyone calling him Ollie. I hope in due course that someone will tell the London tourist board of this Puritan tendency, just as I hope, too, that the Minister for sport—an inspired appointment—will survive within this Spartan regime.

I take my final words from the war that gave the Puritans power, and from that notable royalist officer, Sir Jacob Astley. He might be said to have had the first words of the war, for it was on the morning of the battle of Edgehill that he gave the English language that great prayer:

"O Lord! thou knowest how busy I must be this day: if I forget thee, do not thou forget me."

I commend that prayer to the Treasury Bench. More apposite still to this debate are what might be regarded as the last words of the war, when, in 1646, he surrendered the garrison at the manor house at Stow-on-the-Wold and

handed over his sword to the parliamentarian commander with the words, "You have beaten us. Now go fall out among yourselves."

11.55 am

Mr. Stephen Twigg (Enfield, Southgate): It is a great privilege to have the opportunity to make my maiden speech so early in the parliamentary Session, and I am delighted to be here as the first ever Labour Member of Parliament for the constituency of Enfield, Southgate. I hope to be the first in a long line of Labour Members of Parliament elected by the people of Enfield, Southgate, where I was born and brought up.

During my lifetime, there have been just two Members of Parliament for the constituency before me. Michael Portillo was elected in a by-election in 1984. Shortly after his election to Parliament, he visited Southgate school, where I was then a sixth former. Although our politics were miles apart, Michael Portillo impressed me then as an articulate, charismatic and candid politician. Since then, he has provided more than 12 years of professional service to the people of Enfield, Southgate. During the general election campaign, on our rare encounters, he was always courteous and charming, and on the night of the election count his dignity in defeat earned him widespread and well-deserved respect. I am sure that, if he chooses to do so, he will continue to play an important role in the public life of this country.

Mr. Portillo succeeded Sir Anthony Berry, who was tragically killed in the Brighton conference bombing in 1984. Sir Anthony Berry represented the people of Enfield, Southgate for more than 20 years in the House and is still remembered with great respect and affection by many of my constituents. In his maiden speech here in 1965, Sir Anthony warned of the dangers of the introduction of comprehensive education in Enfield. As a product of Southgate comprehensive school, I have to say that I think that many of his fears have proved to be unfounded.

Enfield, Southgate is a wonderful and diverse local constituency. We embrace both the busy, urban life of Palmers Green and the north circular road, and the rural tranquillity of Hadley Wood and the green belt. Much of my constituency is a collection of villages—Southgate Green, Oakwood, Grange Park and Winchmore Hill, which has been spared a drive-through McDonald's because of the determined opposition of local people and the good sense of our local Labour-controlled council.

Southgate's diversity is a great strength. It is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious community. Only this week, I had the privilege to lay the foundation stone for the new Hindu community centre of the Darji Mitra Mandal. There is a large Jewish community, as well as significant numbers of Christians, Muslims and Sikhs. It will be a privilege to represent them all.

During my election campaign, perhaps the biggest single issue on the doorstep was the future of the island of Cyprus. I warmly welcome the Government's commitment in the Gracious Speech to seeking a just and lasting settlement in Cyprus and I look forward to giving my full and active support to those efforts.

Perhaps the most positive feature of the recent campaign for me was the opportunity to discuss politics with large numbers of young, first-time voters in my constituency. For me, the first sign of the large swing to

[Mr. Stephen Twigg]

Labour in Enfield, Southgate came with the results of the mock elections at our three local secondary schools, Winchmore, Broomfield and Southgate. All three schools voted Labour by overwhelming majorities. That showed the way forward for the results in Enfield, Southgate.

I have never accepted the widely held idea that young people today are apathetic and not interested in politics. I am involved in a Fabian Society research project working with young, first-time voters, talking to them about their attitudes and opinions. In my experience, young people have clear values and strong opinions. What they reject is not politics itself, but the way we do politics in this country—the style, the language and, above all, the adversarial culture. It is an adversarial culture which is best symbolised by the old way that Prime Minister's Question Time was done. I am sure that many people will welcome the change made in the past week.

At the election, the biggest swing to Labour was among first-time voters. This Parliament owes it to our young people to forge a new sort of politics based on consensus, dialogue and co-operation. That is why constitutional reform is so important.

I welcome the commitments in the Gracious Speech to devolution, the incorporation of the European convention on human rights and to reform of Parliament itself. This is not some arcane, abstract debate that is of interest only to the so-called chattering classes. It is about devolving power to the people and starting to restore people's faith in politics.

As a Greater London Member of Parliament, I especially welcome the proposals for a new strategic authority and a directly elected mayor for London. This country is alone in the democratic world in denying its capital city a democratic voice. The removal of that voice was one of the most petty and vindictive acts of the previous Government. I look forward to a new elected authority, working alongside an elected mayor. The mayor will be a powerful champion of London's interests, ensuring that our first-class capital city has the impact and influence that it rightly deserves. I hope that all hon. Members representing London, regardless of their party, will unite in campaigning for a yes vote in the proposed Londonwide referendum.

Constitutional reform is not some academic debating point; it has real relevance to the bread and butter concerns of our constituents. A new authority for London can start to improve the appalling state of our transport system. Greater London's crumbling transport infrastructure is letting down the people and the economy of this great city. We need a new authority and we need a new mayor to take the lead and get London moving again. The Labour party supports a proportional voting system for the proposed new Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly. I hope that we shall also adopt a similar system for the new London authority. That will ensure that we have a credible London voice representing the diversity of opinion in our capital city.

More widely, as my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Mr. Mitchell) said, our manifesto proposes a commission on electoral reform for the House of Commons, followed by a referendum. Proportional representation for this House is an idea whose time has come. Electoral reform is an important democratic

change, which will assist in the renewal of hope and faith in politics itself. Labour's proposed referendum will enable the people to decide how the House is elected. It is a momentous and crucial commitment. Following the election result in Scotland, Wales and much of urban England, it is an argument that I hope the Opposition will take more seriously than they have done, both in the interests of democracy and of their party.

This Parliament is often described as the mother of Parliaments. There is much in our parliamentary history of which we can be proud. Constitutional reform is not about tearing up our history, but about building on what is good and changing what is not. I support the Government's proposals, both because they are good and because they will contribute to the renewal of politics and democracy in this country. Now is the time for a new, consensual politics in the United Kingdom. I look forward to playing my small part in securing those important and long-overdue reforms.

12.3 pm

Mr. David Trimble (Upper Bann): First, I must congratulate you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, on the position in which you find yourself and Labour Members on their election success. I wish them all the best for this Parliament.

I am particularly pleased to be able to follow the maiden speech of the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr. Twigg), which was a pleasure to listen to. Of course, I did not agree with all of it, but it was thoughtful and I think we have someone here who will make a significant contribution to the House. I did not see the television coverage in question, but I understand that one of the great pleasures that people derived from watching it and one of the high points was seeing the astonishment of the hon. Gentleman when he won the seat. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will enjoy his stay in the House.

I should like to take up some points from the Prime Minister's speech on Wednesday, but, before doing that, I want to query a passage at the beginning of the speech. He was clearly speaking from the heart when he referred to new Labour as

"the one nation party in British politics today."

Later in his speech he told hon. Members:

"They will see Labour Members of Parliament from every part of the country; every region, every nation."

I see a smile on the faces of some Labour Members and my next point is obvious and predictable. While the Prime Minister's ambition is laudable, it is not accurate because there are no Labour Members from one of the constituent parts of the United Kingdom, part of which I have the honour to represent. That is not a petty point: it is a substantive one.

The question for the Prime Minister and the Labour party is that when they speak about "our country" and "our nation" do they include all of our country and our nation or are they mentally censoring out the British people of Ulster? That is a question for them to ponder. Old Labour discriminated against our part of the United Kingdom and the old Labour rules that new Labour has inherited prevent anybody in Northern Ireland from even joining the Labour party. That is a unique disadvantage for the people of Northern Ireland and it is not shared by people anywhere else in the world.

In every other country, people can join the Labour party or one of its support organisations. That leads to the joke which I told at the Labour party conference. It caused some amusement, but it is not original, and it is the question of what one does in Bangkok but not in Belfast. The answer, of course, is join the Labour party because everything else that can be done in Bangkok can be done in Belfast. The substantial point relates to whether new Labour will try to be a party and a Government for the whole nation. I hope that they will meet that challenge.

I refer with approval to another passage in the Prime Minister's speech. He said:

"Britain . . . must change a situation in which unelected quangos spend more money than elected local government".—[*Official Report*, 14 May 1997; Vol. 294, c. 61-62.]

I say, "Hear, hear" to that. I hope that when the Prime Minister looks at those quangos that spend more than local government he will also look at the situation in Northern Ireland where, thanks to the previous Government, unelected quangos spend nine times as much as what is called local government in Northern Ireland. Hon. Members may think that local government in England, Scotland and Wales is disadvantaged, but in Northern Ireland it is so limited that quangos spend nine times as much.

There is a need for representative local government in Northern Ireland. The Secretary of State for Scotland spoke about the need for devolution in Scotland and justified it by referring to Scotland's separate legal system and its social differences. Those arguments apply with equal force to Northern Ireland, which also has a separate legal system and where there are clear differences in social and cultural attitudes and, in some cases, even national allegiance. There is a clear need for devolution.

I have some queries about the meaning of some parts of the Gracious Speech. The commitment to incorporate the European convention on human rights has been mentioned, and in principle I approve of that. However, I am a little curious about why the main part of the Gracious Speech refers to incorporating

"the main provisions of the European Convention on Human Rights."

It is all or nothing for that. I commend to the House the thoughtful contributions by Opposition Members on some of the practical problems of incorporation. Those need to be considered and I speak as someone who, in principle, favours incorporation. We must look carefully at the implications for the House and for the ability of the people of the United Kingdom to control the legislation that affects them. That is important because when we try to protect the position of the House we do not do it for the benefit of the more than 600 Members but for the benefit of the people who sent us here because we are the guardians of their rights.

I want to query also a reference in the paragraph relating to Northern Ireland. It announces that the Government will bring forward legislation to deal with

"other measures to protect human rights".

One queries what that might mean, because it clearly envisages something that goes beyond the European convention. It must go beyond the convention because it cannot be less and it cannot depart from provisions in the convention without being in breach of that. I should like to know the Government's thinking on that matter.

There are some areas where one could go beyond the European convention on human rights. The United Nations declaration on human rights and the UN covenant on civil and political rights contain provisions dealing particularly with civil and political rights that are not contained in the European convention, which is quite a modest document. I would look favourably on the incorporation of some of the provisions in the UN declaration and in the UN covenant. It would be interesting.

Some hon. Members may recall how, in the previous Parliament, I regularly made the point and supported it with detailed argument to show that the direct-rule regime in Northern Ireland is in conflict with the UN covenant. Never did I hear any coherent response from the Government Benches. It will be interesting if we manage to move to those matters. Of course, it would be better to remove that inconsistency and to ensure that the same quality of democracy existed in Northern Ireland as exists elsewhere in the UK.

Other points in the Northern Ireland paragraph will no doubt be amplified by my hon. Friends speaking on other days in the debate, but I read with concern the passing reference in the paragraph to matters such as increasing confidence in policing. When dealing with Northern Ireland, it is not wise to use language in that fashion without explaining what one means. From speaking to people in Northern Ireland during the election and since, I know that the bland reference in the Labour party manifesto to reform of the police caused considerable unease and did much to increase tension in Northern Ireland.

In the absence of any detailed explanation by Labour of its intentions, the phrase was interpreted as meaning a commitment by Labour to adopt the republican attitude to policing. Labour referred to confidence-building measures on policing. What it means, of course, is the abolition of the Royal Ulster Constabulary or its reconstruction out of recognition. I hope that that is not the Government's intention, but it is necessary to spell out that intention because to introduce such phrases without giving an explanation gives rise to increased tension and causes alarm. It is not wise to do that.

I note also the reference to reducing "tension over parades". If the Government were to give more confidence to the community about their overall objectives, that would reduce tension over parades. The main point to remember about parades is that they are not a cause; they are a symptom. The tensions that arise there are symptoms of other causes. That should be borne in mind.

I shall not go into detail on that topic because, as I say, I hope that a colleague of mine will go into it in more detail, but I will share with the House just a few quotes, as it were. In a secret speech last November in Athboy in the Republic of Ireland, the gentleman who has been returned to serve as Member of Parliament for Belfast, West, but who is refusing to discharge his obligation, said:

"Ask any activist in the North did Drumcree happen by accident . . . they will tell you No. Three years work went into creating that situation . . . and they are the type of scene changes we have to focus in on and develop."

That is part of what I mean when I say that we have to bear in mind what is a cause and what is an effect, and who is creating a problem and who is manipulating it.

[Mr. David Trimble]

Last autumn, Irish officials at the Anglo-Irish intergovernmental secretariat in Northern Ireland were heard to say—they attend the inter-party talks and, consequently, there is some awareness of their views—that they realised that, last summer, they had gone too far. They know, even if hon. Members do not, that they exercise governmental functions within Northern Ireland. I should like to think that their mistake was simply through ignorance of the facts in Northern Ireland, but I fear that that is not the case. I fear that their malevolence played a greater part. It is a reproach to the Opposition spokesman, the right hon. Member for Devizes (Mr. Ancram), that they were allowed to play such a part in destabilising society in Northern Ireland.

Much more admirable is the approach adopted by the hon. Member for Foyle (Mr. Hume). In the *Irish Times* on 19 October 1996 he referred to a controversial parade and said:

"Given the Apprentice Boys are marching early in the morning and that only local members will take part in a 20 minute parade... I think they should be allowed to have their parade and that their rights should be respected."

I heartily endorse the hon. Gentleman's view.

On the Government's main proposals on constitutional matters and the principles that they have announced, one would endorse the commitments that they gave in their manifesto to decentralisation, devolution, openness and accountability. I should be delighted to see greater and more effective accountability, and greater openness. I endorse entirely the proposition that there should be decentralisation and devolution.

My party has never been opposed to devolution in principle. We have been keenly interested in the details. I was interested to hear the powerful speech of the hon. Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) who raised questions about the Scottish proposals. They were very well put and deserve an answer. We will listen carefully to the answers. We are greatly interested in the details of devolution. Our experience in Northern Ireland is worth considering, because advantage can be gathered from it. We certainly hope to take part in the debate: I trust that there will be a proper debate.

One of the disadvantages of sending these important issues upstairs to a Standing Committee is that not all views in the House can be expressed in such a Committee. That is particularly true for smaller parties, such as ours, whose members rarely find themselves on Standing Committees considering major issues. That is one of the reasons why it is so important for constitutional issues to be dealt with on the Floor of the House. The full range of opinion in the House can then be expressed properly.

We have no problems with devolution in principle: indeed, in some areas we favour it. The Conservatives continue to make the mistake of arguing that there is a necessary connection between devolution and disunity. There is no necessary connection: it does not follow from the nature or the basic concept of devolution. It depends very much on the nature of the devolution, on the extent of the powers given and on the social context in which it happens. Devolution in Northern Ireland did not lead to disunity and did not weaken the kingdom: the kingdom was stronger during devolution. The United Kingdom has been demonstrably weakened since the ending of devolution in Northern Ireland.

We must consider the practical matters. Devolution will work if we get the details right and if there is sensible co-operation between the centre and the regions. Sensible co-operation means a clear delineation and definition of responsibilities. Failure to respect the regions causes problems: that is one of the mistakes that the Conservative party made over the years. The feeling in the regions that they have been treated unfairly has fuelled the demand for devolution, although those demands and the attitudes to them are sometimes unrealistic.

The Government are in danger—particularly with regard to Scotland—of overselling their proposals and creating expectations that will not be met. That would play into the hands of those who are hostile to the existence of the Union, and that is not in Scotland's interest. Ministers are more realistic about devolution in Wales. They should not oversell the issues.

Possibilities for significant policy differences between the regions are very limited. Even now, I do not think that it would be possible to return to the situation that prevailed in Northern Ireland between 1922 and the late-1960s. It would not be possible to sustain a policy in Northern Ireland that was significantly different from that in other parts of the United Kingdom, primarily because the expectations of people there and those in the rest of the UK are set primarily by the media. The UK media are highly centralised and unified, and it is consequently not possible to maintain significantly different social provision levels in the various areas, because people will be aware of those differences through the national media and make their demands. Radical differences in social provision in the United Kingdom are also not possible, because it is a highly integrated state. We must remember that important fact.

We also cannot go too far down the devolution road and create a quasi-federal arrangement in the United Kingdom, primarily because England would not want to do so. England, which contains more than 80 per cent. of the UK population, will inevitably be the centre of gravity. That is a basic reality within which those who argue for devolution—whether in Northern Ireland, Scotland or Wales—will have to work.

Equally, it must be realised that the United Kingdom is not a uniform state, and that it is right to have a regional policy that recognises the different regions. Such a policy may not seem intellectually neat, but it would reflect the reality of the situation if regional bodies—whether they are called assemblies, councils or something else—are established in the other parts of the United Kingdom, and it would emphasise a regional aspect that might otherwise be ignored by institutions that are too tightly focused on the United Kingdom.

In the interests of the regions, I strongly believe that fiscal unity of the United Kingdom should be maintained. Once we vary tax rates, we strike at the very core of the argument for equal service provision, which is the other side of the coin. If we vary tax rates, we cannot claim to provide services equally. Because higher expenditure levels are often necessary in some areas to achieve an equal quality of service, that would be very much against the regions' interests.

I appreciate the irritation that is sometimes felt by people about the crude comparisons that are made between per capita expenditure in Scotland and England and between Northern Ireland and England, because areas

with greater need or with a less dense population often require higher spending to achieve the same service level. If one varies the fiscal unity of the United Kingdom, that provision issue will arise.

The fiscal question in the proposed referendums is wrong.

Mr. Salmond: The hon. Gentleman, in his experience, must be aware that, until the 1950s, Northern Ireland was certainly a net contributor to the United Kingdom Exchequer. He will know that, in January, a Treasury parliamentary answer stated that, in Scotland, since 1979 there was a revenue-over-expenditure surplus of £27,000 million.

Mr. Trimble: That point is highly debatable, and I will not deal with it now. There are different ways of calculating those figures, but the fact is that, on identifiable public expenditure, the regions are net beneficiaries.

The questions in the proposed referendums are not as well focused as they could be. The point made by the hon. Member for Linlithgow on the desirability of allowing bodies to raise finance is important, but it would be better to raise such finance by means other than varying national taxation rates. That is why in most countries in which there is extensive devolution or federalism, local finance is provided through, for example, a local sales tax or property taxes. That is a better basis and, of course, avoids some of the problems that the hon. Gentleman mentioned. However, I agree that if one is designing some form of devolution, one must ensure that it is built on something that will last and that it will work. That is extremely important.

I approve of the comments that the Prime Minister made on Wednesday about participation in the present Northern Ireland talks process. It is not possible to include parties that have hitherto been involved in terrorism unless they decisively commit themselves "once and for all" to the democratic process. I welcome the use of the phrase "once and for all", which goes further than some of the unsatisfactory formulae that we heard from the previous Government.

While it may be necessary to give people a further opportunity to join the process, it is important that that is the last chance and that the talks proceed. We cannot wait for ever to see whether people who have no real commitment to peaceful means and the democratic process are going to change when there is no reason to believe that such a change is possible. By holding the process back, we are preventing what might be possible.

I believe that it is possible to find agreement in Northern Ireland. Surprisingly, it is not difficult to predict the basic outlines of that agreement. We see commitment among the major parties in Northern Ireland to some form of regional administration. We propose that it operate on the basis of proportionality. That is not a general endorsement of proportional representation, because the arguments at local level are different from those here where the crucial issue is that of forming a Government rather than a limited regional administration.

We support the concept of a Bill of Rights and will examine the procedures spelt out by the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe. We recognise that what happens in Northern Ireland happens not in isolation

but in a British context and that there are different identities within Northern Ireland which have to be taken into account. The right balance has to be struck and it could be struck if the principal parties to the process were able to get down to the details. That should not be too difficult.

During the election campaign, and since, I said that I regarded this Parliament as an opportunity. I think that the Government's commitment to decentralisation and openness creates opportunities for us. The Ulster Unionist party is ready to grasp any and every opportunity that will bring real peace and democracy to our part of the United Kingdom.

We expect the Government to discharge their duties to our people who have for far too long been treated as second-class citizens by the House. We will insist on equality of treatment for Northern Ireland. We are entitled to the same democratic rights as other parts of the UK. We hope that the Prime Minister will answer in the affirmative the question that I posed earlier about whether we are included in his concept of the country and the people.

12.28 pm

Mr. George Galloway (Glasgow, Kelvin): Listening to the interesting but in some places rather sour speech of the hon. Member for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble) and his litany of complaints about the previous Government, I wondered why he and his parliamentary colleagues spent so much time and energy propping up the late Government, keeping them in power long after it was even in their own interests to remain so. The hon. Gentleman and his colleagues earned the resentment not only of the Opposition—now the Government—but of vast swathes of British people who wanted an election and who wanted rid of the previous Government who were sustained time and again by the hon. Gentleman and his party.

Mr. Trimble: The hon. Gentleman's point might have some weight if there were a scrap of truth in it, but there is not. If he looks back over the proceedings of the House of Commons in the past 18 months he will find that there were only two occasions on which the Government might have been defeated. On the first occasion, they were sustained by the abstention of the Democratic Unionist party and on the second occasion they were sustained by the abstention of the Social Democratic and Labour party. In no vote in the past 18 months were the previous Government sustained by the Ulster Unionist party.

Mr. Galloway: There could have been votes if the Ulster Unionists had not signalled in advance that they were determined to prop up that Government. That was the feeling that we had in the last Parliament and it colours the glass through which we look at the hon. Gentleman and his new-found unhappiness about the conduct of affairs under the Conservative Government.

Notwithstanding some of the sourness of the hon. Gentleman's contribution, this has been a remarkably interesting parliamentary occasion. We have witnessed the moving parliamentary debut of my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley (Mrs. Cryer), whom we all welcome warmly to the House for her qualities and because of the fond memories that hon. Members on both

[Mr. Galloway]

sides have of her late husband, Bob Cryer. We have also heard the remarkable maiden speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr. Twigg), delivered with such polish, verve and youthfulness. I agree with the hon. Member for Upper Bann that my hon. Friend will make a major contribution to life in the House. The graciousness of his commiserations with his predecessor and his tribute to his predecessor's work in the House were to his credit.

We have also heard the remarkable erudition and wit of the right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke). He characteristically appeared in the tradition of the upper class, civilised English officer played by Michael Caine in the film to which he alluded. Michael Caine was so civilised that he voted Labour two weeks ago for the first time in several elections. Alas for the right hon. Gentleman's party and for all of us, the five bald men fighting over a comb, fighting for the leadership of the Conservative party, do not come from that tradition. We are likely to face a new leader of Her Majesty's Opposition in the tradition of Private Hook of Rorke's Drift rather than the elegance of the right hon. Gentleman.

This has been an important debate. I wanted to welcome my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland, who is not in his place. He and I go back a long way. Almost 20 years ago, he picked me up from Queen Street station. I put my luggage in the back of his car and we drove to Langholm street in the Garscadden constituency, where he was fighting the historic by-election. We went in a door and when we came out five minutes later his car had been broken into and all my luggage had been stolen. That was where the fast track for young offenders was born—an idea that was emblazoned on our parliamentary pledges card during the election campaign. I have metaphorically broken my right hon. Friend's windows on some occasions since then, but I hope that he does not harbour a grudge against me for that because I genuinely welcome him to his position—a position for which he was born and for which he is better suited than any other parliamentarian.

I was sorry that my right hon. Friend's opponent at the start of the debate unsheathed the sword of no-change Unionism in reply. That was churlish from a party that had been so comprehensively routed under the current electoral system—I want to say something about that in a minute—in the countries of Scotland and Wales. I should have thought that a little more humility might have been in order. It is not as though the peoples of Scotland and Wales were not treated to all the arguments of the former Secretary of State for Wales and of the former Secretary of State for Scotland, who was then the right hon. Member for Stirling. The Scottish and Welsh people were not ignorant of their point of view.

The Conservative case was put comprehensively—indeed, almost as comprehensively as any other issue in the election. The former Prime Minister stalked the country wearing his no-change Unionism on his sleeve and warning the people of Scotland and Wales of the consequences of electing a Labour Government, which in overwhelming numbers they nevertheless did and routed the parliamentary forces of the Conservative party in Scotland and Wales.

The right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague) struck a more discordant note than his party colleagues in Scotland are striking. He does not appear to know that a thorough debate is going on in the ranks of the Scottish Conservatives about whether to abandon the no-change unionist position. They are right to consider that, for it is important to recognise—I was glad that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland made this point—that Scotland is not a Tory-free zone. Half a million good, decent, patriotic Scottish people voted Conservative in Scotland two weeks ago. It is the outrageousness of our voting system that has robbed those half a million decent Scottish citizens of parliamentary representation.

Mr. Bernard Jenkin: Who will speak for them, then?

Mr. Galloway: Those people certainly will not have any parliamentarians to speak for them; that is a matter of regret. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will take that as a sincerely felt point of view.

The thinking upper reaches of the Scottish Conservatives—among whom I include the right hon. Member for Devises (Mr. Ancram), who in a previous life was a Scottish Conservative, the former Foreign Secretary and many others—believed that there was a case for Scottish devolution. I urge the present Government to try to be as inclusive as possible in the approach to and the conduct of the referendum and to try to take with them those civilised, thinking sectors of Scottish Conservative opinion who are engaged in that thought process at the minute, as they do, indeed, represent an important strand of political opinion which is, sadly, unrepresented. We want them to be in the new Scottish Parliament; that is one of the reasons why, at political cost to ourselves, we have developed a proportional representation system that will allow them properly to be represented there.

I rather regretted the tone of the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks, who was presumably playing to a different gallery from the constitutional debate. I picked up on a word that the right hon. Gentleman used three times in his speech and which the former Prime Minister used throughout the general election campaign. It is a significant misnomer and lies at the heart of the failure of many Conservatives to understand the national question in Scotland. The former Prime Minister constantly referred to "the British nation". There is no British nation. This is a multinational country—a multinational state.

No one in Scotland, whether Conservative, Liberal Democrat, nationalist or Labour, regards himself or herself first and foremost as British. The Scottish people regard themselves first and foremost as Scottish and thereafter as British to a greater or lesser extent. It is the failure to grasp that fundamental point which has led the Scottish Conservative party to the sorry pass in which it now finds itself.

The overwhelming majority of the Scottish people want to have the best of both worlds, and what is wrong with that? They want to express their Scottishness and to have a political focus in a Parliament in Edinburgh without losing the great benefits of being part of a multinational state in these islands. Conservatives should also be able to grasp that proposition because our country is a sum greater than its parts. There is no contradiction between being a Scottish patriot and a

British patriot. It is one of the idiocies of the so-called cricket test set by Lord Tebbit. It is perfectly possible to be loyal to more than one country. Indian and Pakistani citizens who live in Britain do it, and so do Scottish and Welsh citizens. It is perfectly possible to have multilayered patriotism, with a commitment to Britain and to one's own nationality within it.

I say to those who criticise our attempt to reform the British state—I should not need to say it to Conservatives—that the bough that will not bend is the bough that may well break. Those of us who are trying to make amendments that will make our islands a better, more democratic, more decentralised and more civilised place in which to live deserve critical support from Conservatives rather than root and branch opposition.

Let me say to my very dear hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell), with whom I have travelled many long political miles, that I am in complete agreement with him on almost every question. He won my heart one day in the Blackburn West Lothian miners' club after he had seen me score a goal against a local West Lothian team by saying that he had not seen a left foot like mine since Puskas. I have been a loyal supporter of his ever since. However, he will have noted the significantly greater murmur of approval from the Opposition to his arguments on the Scottish question than normally meets his propositions. With all due respect, I hope that that will chasten him. Of course, the specific questions that he raises are academically interesting, but I believe that they are simply that. The British constitution is riddled with such academically interesting questions.

It is said that according to the laws of aerodynamics the bumble bee cannot fly—it is too heavy for its wing span and its wings are too slight—and yet we all know that it does fly. And so does the British constitution, despite all the anomalies which, were we at a seminar, we could easily identify. They include an unelected second chamber, an hereditary monarchy and the fact that in a previous Parliament English Members were able to impose the poll tax in Scotland, when it had been absolutely rejected by the people of Scotland, at a cost of several thousand million pounds, a whole year before its introduction here. There are innumerable anomalies, including the position of Northern Ireland, which has also been mentioned. We are trying as best we can to find a new *modus vivendi* that will make the British state work better. That is what lies behind the blast of constitutional fresh air that the Queen's Speech intends to blow down the sclerotic arteries of the British state. We do not hate the British state: we want to save it and make it better.

The Opposition's policy of no-change unionism has no support worth speaking of in either Scotland or Wales. A significant number of Conservative voters in those two countries did before and are certainly now coming out of the woodwork and saying that it is time for change.

A new Parliament for Scotland will give expression to the legitimate national aspirations of the people of my country who have waited a long time for it.

More than a century ago, Keir Hardie had three demands. He had a pledge card with three pledges on it: home rule for Scotland, proportional representation, and prohibition of alcohol. I very much hope that, by the end of the Parliament we shall have won a great victory for two out of three of those propositions. I look forward very much, under the leadership of my right hon. Friend the

Secretary of State for Scotland—I hope that someone will draw his attention to the kind remarks that I made about him in his absence at the beginning of my speech—to fighting the campaign for the referendum in the autumn, which I hope will be inclusive and which I am certain will result in an overwhelming vote in favour of home rule for Scotland according to the plans of the Scottish Constitutional Convention.

12.44 pm

Mr. Alasdair Morgan (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale): I thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to make my maiden speech in this important debate. I pay tribute to my predecessor, Ian Lang. Ian served for some 18 years as the Member of Parliament first for Galloway and then for Galloway and Upper Nithsdale. During that period, he held some of the great offices of state for the United Kingdom and I am sure that hon. Members will join me in paying tribute to his service.

I should also mention Ian Lang's predecessor as the hon. Member for Galloway, George Thompson. George was a Scottish National party Member of Parliament and is well known for having been a diligent, hard-working Member. As I went around Galloway and Upper Nithsdale during the campaign, I certainly found out how much people still remember George with great affection and gratitude. His will certainly be a difficult example to follow.

Galloway and Upper Nithsdale is a vast constituency, even in Scottish terms. It stretches from Portpatrick in the west almost up to the boundaries of Dumfries in the east, from the Mull of Galloway in the south to Wanlockhead in the north. Despite the fact that Galloway and Upper Nithsdale is a lowlands rather than a highlands seat, Wanlockhead is the highest village in the United Kingdom.

Galloway and Upper Nithsdale has been at the heart of Scotland's history over many years. St Ninian brought Christianity to Galloway several centuries before Columba went to Iona. I believe that it was the first Christian settlement outside the boundaries of the then Roman empire. Some years later, Galloway was the site of the battle of Glentrool, where Her Majesty's ancestor King Robert I, King of Scots, won his first victory in the wars of Scottish independence.

Galloway and Upper Nithsdale is also a very varied constituency. In the west, we have the major town and sea ferry port for Ireland at Stranraer. Throughout the rest of the constituency, we have market towns and very rich farmland, and in the north-east the unfortunately now rather depressed ex-mining areas of Upper Nithsdale, Sanquhar and Kirkcubbin.

Galloway and Upper Nithsdale has very beautiful countryside. Although it is sometimes forgotten and passed by as people head north to the obvious attractions of Edinburgh and the more advertised attractions of the highlands, it is perhaps the most beautiful part of Scotland. Unfortunately, however, beauty does not pay the rent or put food on the table. Some of the highest levels of unemployment in all of Scotland are in Upper Nithsdale, the Newton Stewart travel-to-work area and around Stranraer. I have heard during the course of this debate, however, that Wigtown in the South Machars—one of the worst areas of rural unemployment—has today won the race to be Scotland's first book town and only

[*Mr. Alasdair Morgan*]

the second such town in the United Kingdom. I am sure that that will do something to alleviate the problems of the South Machars.

Given the problems of high unemployment and the terrible lack of other employment opportunities, I was happy to hear the emphasis by the Government in the Gracious Speech on attacking youth and long-term unemployment. I know that my constituents will be looking for real action in the south-west of Scotland to flow from those promises. I am, however, somewhat sceptical about the methods with which the Government propose to fund such measures—namely, the windfall tax.

Closely tied up with the problem of unemployment in Galloway and Upper Nithsdale is the transport infrastructure—especially the roads, since railways form only a small part of the infrastructure in my constituency. The road network in Galloway is essential if we are to attract new investment. It is also essential for the prosperity of the major town of Stranraer, which depends totally on ferry traffic to Ireland. The A75, the main route from Stranraer to the English border at Gretna, is part of the Euro-route from Ireland to Leningrad. There is a sick joke in Galloway that the only two speed restrictions on the road from Stranraer to Leningrad have been imposed in the two villages of Crocketford and Springholm in the constituency, where a lorry going to Leningrad, if such exists, has to slow down to 30 mph on two occasions. We shall be looking for urgent action to address the infrastructure problems of Galloway and especially the A75.

I have already said that my constituency is largely agricultural. Galloway is especially well known for its beef. High-quality Galloway beef is sought after in Scotland and throughout the world and until recently much of it was exported. It has been disastrous for Galloway and its farming community—and for the other communities that depend on the farming community—that Scottish beef can no longer be exported to Europe and to much of the rest of the world. It is essential that the Government build on the new relationship which seems to be available with the European Union to work quickly and take all necessary actions to achieve a lifting of the beef ban. If Scottish and Irish herds have to go first, ahead of the pack, and have the restrictions lifted early, so be it.

I come now to the constitution, which is the focus of today's debate. Demand for constitutional change has long been at the top of the Scottish agenda and the focus for political debate in Scotland. I am glad that it is now top of the political agenda at Westminster, as evinced by the fact that the Referendums (Scotland and Wales) Bill was the first to be published in this Session.

The strongest argument for Scottish self-government is the democratic one. Like the people of all nations, Scots should have the right to determine and run their own affairs. The Government claim that their proposals are closely modelled on those of the Scottish Constitutional Convention. The founding document of the convention was the Claim of Right, which stated that the convention acknowledged

"the sovereign right of the Scottish people to determine the form of Government best suited to their needs."

That principle was endorsed by the present Secretary of State for Scotland and by all—bar one—Labour Members. I trust that they will not now turn their backs on that principle which they endorsed some years ago.

I am concerned that the Government's proposals will not give the people of Scotland the right to determine their form of government. The Government's refusal to support a multi-option referendum with independence as one of the options and their proposal instead to have a take-it-or-leave-it referendum, as though the Labour party's proposals were the only possible option, represent a refusal to recognise the democratic right of Scots to determine not only whether they want a Parliament but what kind of Parliament it should be.

The Secretary of State for Scotland, who opened today's debate, agreed that the election had not given consent to his party's proposals. That argument emphasises the need for a genuine, multi-option referendum with all the options on the ballot paper. Scotland is, after all, a country: it is not a county or a parish. We therefore need a real Parliament in Scotland and not a county council, still less a parish council. To represent the people of Scotland properly, we need a Parliament that is restricted only by the willingness of its members to take decisions and not by rules laid down in any other place.

During the election campaign, the hon. Member for Cunninghame, North (Mr. Wilson), who is now a Minister of State at the Scottish Office, suggested that a devolved Assembly would not be able to organise its own referendum to find out whether the Scots wanted to take constitutional change a step further. In that context, I remind the House of the words of Charles Stewart Parnell, spoken in Cork in 1885:

"No man has a right to fix the boundary of the march of a nation; no man has a right to say to his country—thus far shalt thou go and no further."

I trust that no such restriction will be put on any Scottish Parliament.

Nevertheless, if such a Parliament is set up in Scotland during the next few years, my friends and I will work for it in a positive way to further the interests of the Scottish people—and I mean all their interests. Clearly, we shall seek to enlarge and strengthen the powers of such a Scottish Parliament.

The present Parliament will probably be the last of the millennium. It is therefore appropriate that this should be a time of opportunity for the people of Scotland, and we shall seek to ensure that we make the best of that opportunity for them.

12.55 pm

Mr. John Cryer (Hornchurch): I congratulate the new hon. Member for Galloway and Upper Nithsdale (Mr. Morgan) on his confident and forthright speech. I did not agree with all of it, but it was a good speech, and I am sure that he will make many more contributions—as, I hope, will all new Members.

I thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for calling me so early in the debate on the Gracious Speech. As many hon. Members on both sides of the House will know, my father was a Member of the House for many years, first for Keighley and then for Bradford, South. They may not know, however, that after the February election in 1974 he was the first new Member to make his maiden speech. He got in immediately on the Wednesday afternoon, under the advice and guidance, you will not be surprised to hear, Mr. Deputy Speaker, of my hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Mr. Skinner).

My father was a fine parliamentarian and, more important, a fine socialist. I am grateful for the fact that I had his inspiration and guidance for many years, and I wish, as I am sure many other people here do, that he was still around. He would have had a great contribution to make, and he would have been thrilled to see the glorious victory by the Labour party on 1 May. He would have regarded that as a fine result.

Unlike my father's constituencies, mine is in east London. Many people in Hornchurch originate in the east end of London, and take great pride in those roots. The constituency elected a Conservative Member of Parliament for 18 years, but I am glad that its people have now elected me as their Labour Member, and I think that Hornchurch will remain a Labour seat for many years to come.

Many people in the area depend on two sectors of the economy—small and medium businesses, and the banking and financial institutions of the City of London. People who depend on both those sources of work have been hurt over the past eight or 10 years.

Canvassing during the campaign, I met many small business men and women who had been brought to their knees by the policies of the Conservative Government. One, who said to me, "Quite honestly, I was a Thatcherite in the 80s," was a builder with his own business, and, having talked to him for 10 minutes, I would say that he was on the verge of some sort of breakdown. He was up to his eyes in debt, with all sorts of problems, and was starting to wonder what would happen to his family, his house and his business over the next two or three years.

In the City, too, there have been massive job losses, comparable to those in the mining and steel industries in the 1980s. The people who go to work from Hornchurch into the City of London have suffered enormously.

The other aspect of life in Hornchurch that suffered greatly under the policies of the previous Government is health. Oldchurch hospital is in Romford rather than Hornchurch, but people go there from all over the borough—and just after Christmas we saw the obscene spectacle of ambulances queuing up outside that hospital, unable to get inside because there were not enough beds or doctors to treat those patients. I personally know many constituents who have had to wait on trolleys in some pain in corridors in Oldchurch hospital because there were not enough doctors to see them.

I am glad to see that the new Government have placed a moratorium on hospital closures. I should like to see more than that. I should like a guarantee to be made that Oldchurch hospital will remain open for many years to come and will have sufficient resources to treat the people of Hornchurch, Romford and Upminster. My two new hon. Friends the Members for Romford (Mrs. Gordon) and for Upminster (Mr. Darvill) will join me in hoping that.

The debate today is on the constitution. The Gracious Address contained a number of measures which I very much welcome, such as legislation for a new authority for Greater London, which is an important measure, and reforms to the House of Lords—personally, I would close it and turn it into a cafeteria, because that is all that it is really good for.

Another element, which was touched on earlier, is the role of Europe, which will impinge enormously on the role of the constitution. If we go down the path of the

Maastricht treaty, the effects will hit millions of people across western Europe and Britain. For instance, the convergence criteria will mean billions of pounds of cuts. It will also mean the transfer of enormous powers from London to unelected, unaccountable bankers sitting in Frankfurt or Bonn, who will then make the decisions for us. That is something that I cannot tolerate.

I was elected to this Chamber to defend universal benefits, free and universal health care, jobs and living standards. If we go down the path of Maastricht, we will not be able to defend those sorts of things in Government. The issue of Europe was brought up on the doorsteps all the time, for a number of reasons. People are becoming genuinely worried about what a single currency might mean for the economy of this country and other countries in western Europe. There is also a feeling that we had the wool pulled over our eyes many years ago.

In 1975—I was only 11 years old at the time—we had a referendum in which Harold Wilson, the then Prime Minister, said that we should stay inside what was then the Common Market for two key reasons: first, because we would have a veto on all policies that we did not want and, secondly, because there would not be an exchange rate mechanism which would be a threat to jobs and living standards. Both those assurances have gone out the window. Mrs. Thatcher signed the Single European Act, which gave up much of our veto, and then we became members of the exchange rate mechanism, which we had to leave in fairly shameful circumstances. Extraordinarily enough, although the ERM undoubtedly attacked our manufacturing base and sacrificed jobs in the name of monetarism, the then Chancellor of the Exchequer, the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke), was desperate to get back inside the ERM once again, presumably to sacrifice thousands more jobs on the altar of monetarism.

A referendum is the right way to proceed on the single currency. I am glad that it is the policy of the Labour party to follow that through. When we come to the House, we carry 60,000 votes or thereabouts. We have one vote, but it is on behalf of 60,000 people. It is a block vote, which is a bit unfashionable these days. When we cast our vote, it has a certain power. If we talk about altering that power in any way, the people of Hornchurch and every other constituency have a right to some role and say in that change. That is why I support a referendum on the single currency. It is absolutely the right way to proceed.

I pay tribute to three Members of Parliament who have given me a great deal of guidance and help in the past two or three years. Certainly since I was nominated to stand for Hornchurch, which was a great privilege and honour for me, my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn), my hon. Friend the Member for Islington, North (Mr. Corbyn) and, most of all, my hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover have given me great help and guidance.

1.4 pm

Mr. Edward Garnier (Harborough): I dare say that the hon. Member for Hornchurch (Mr. Cryer) also received a great deal of support from the hon. Member for Keighley (Mrs. Cryer). I am sure that she, with the rest of us, listened with admiration and, in her case, great pride, as the hon. Gentleman spoke so eloquently and forcefully in his maiden speech from the Benches below the Gangway.

[Mr. Edward Garnier]

When I first came to the House—not so long ago, in 1992—I used to sit on the Government Benches, and the hon. Gentleman's late father sat more or less in the opposite seat that the hon. Gentleman now occupies. If I had shut my eyes, I could have been mistaken in thinking that the words were being uttered by his late father. I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on an excellent maiden speech and I wish him and his mother—who also made an admirable maiden speech earlier this morning—well in their time in the House.

The hon. Member for Galloway and Upper Nithsdale (Mr. Morgan) has a fine tradition to follow in representing that great seat. My former right hon. Friend, Mr. Ian Lang, represented it for many years, as the hon. Gentleman so politely said. I am glad that a man with a Welsh surname who represents a Scottish seat is proud to sit in the United Kingdom Parliament. I wish him well in his time in the House.

I would be remiss if, in the short time available to me, I did not congratulate you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and your colleagues as Deputy Chairmen. I wish you and your colleagues well in taking up the office of Deputy Speaker.

I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague) on what was probably the best speech he has made in Parliament. It is a pity that he had to wait until we were in opposition to make such a speech, but it was one that should be read and re-read by hon. Members on the Treasury Bench, because a great many questions that have yet to be answered were posed in it. I trust that, either in the winding-up speech or later, the Government will condescend to answer in detail the questions that my right hon. Friend put so probingly.

I also congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for the Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke), who gave a characteristically excellent speech which was full of wit and wisdom. It should have been recorded; if it were, he would make as much money as our noble Friend Lord Archer in the selling of it, except that his was no work of fiction. I hope that in due course I will not be found to be right, but I rather suspect that my right hon. Friend—indeed, all of us—will pay rather more for the services of the Lord Chancellor and his right hon. Friend the Prime Minister than my right hon. Friend did when he instructed them as counsel on his behalf before the industrial tribunal. The bills will mount, I fear, but we shall all have to pay them. My right hon. Friend's references to the new model Army and to Ollie were apt.

The hon. Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) made an excellent speech, but I hope that the fact that, in part, it was criticised gently by the hon. Member for Glasgow, Kelvin (Mr. Galloway) and the fact that many Conservative Members will have agreed with it will not prevent Labour Members from reading, considering and, possibly, agreeing with it.

I also commend the speech of my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North-East Bedfordshire (Sir N. Lyell), with whom I worked as parliamentary private secretary when he was Attorney-General in the previous Parliament. His speech was well worth listening to. It was a model of caution and scepticism about the enthusiasm with which the measures addressed in the Gracious Speech were announced by the Government.

I, too, wish the Government well. At some moments, I was even overcome with the excitement of the huge swing against the Conservatives which took place on election night—

The Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Ron Davies): Think how we felt.

Mr. Garnier: I am sure I can, but think how I felt with my swing of only 2.9 per cent. I felt like Smuggit-the-Puggit as I sat there watching the screen as greater politicians than I were swept aside by the landslide.

However, the election result brings with it not only good fortune—and my good wishes—but great responsibility. I hope that the new Government will reflect carefully on everything they do and will not be overcome by their sense of power, rushing things through with enthusiasm but without considering the detail of what they are doing.

I shall concentrate my few remarks on the aspiration to incorporate the European convention on human rights—ECHR—in United Kingdom law. As the hon. Member for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble) said, it is interesting that the Government intend to introduce only the main provisions of the convention. I assume that that means the convention without the protocols. No doubt that will be made clear in due course, as will the reason—if a part, why not the whole?

The convention was the first major achievement of the Council of Europe—the grouping of 10 democratic European states set up in 1949. In the statute of the Council of Europe, the signatories agreed:

“Every Member of the Council of Europe must accept the principles of the rule of law and of the enjoyment by all persons within its jurisdiction of human rights and fundamental freedoms”.

The convention, which the Council drafted during 1949 and 1950, was to be not only an affirmation of principle but a test that potential members of the Council would have to pass before being admitted. That has continued to apply, and, as the membership of the Council of Europe has swollen from 10 to 33, each new member has been required to sign and ratify the convention.

In 1949 and 1950, the ECHR also served to distinguish the democratic states of western Europe from the Soviet-occupied and communist states of eastern and central Europe. Perhaps that is why the human rights information centre of the Council of Europe states that the ECHR is

“the most concrete expression by the member states of the Council of Europe of their profound belief in the values of democracy, peace and justice, and through them, respect for the rights and fundamental freedoms of persons living in our society.”

The United Kingdom was one of the 10 original signatories to the convention, which has been binding on the UK ever since. It entered into force in September 1953, but it has been binding in international law as an external obligation rather than directly as legislation of this Parliament. This country and Ireland are alone among the parties to the convention in not having integrated it in domestic law. Consequently, British citizens are obliged to take their cases to the European Court of Human Rights to obtain rulings based directly on the convention. If they are successful in establishing that this country is in breach of an article of the convention, the judgment does not

have any direct effect; instead, it is for the British Government and Parliament to remedy the situation in such a way as to bring British law or practice into line with the convention, if necessary by means of new legislation.

For many years, there have been arguments about the pros and cons of incorporating the convention. For some, it would be intrinsically desirable as a substitute for the national Bill of Rights that some other countries have entrenched in their constitutions. Drawing up a new Bill of Rights from scratch would inevitably be a difficult and controversial process and could bring conflicts with international agreements such as the European convention, whereas the convention is readily available and is already the yardstick against which human rights in the United Kingdom and many other European countries are measured at Strasbourg.

Supporters of incorporation also hold that it would be preferable for the majority of cases involving the convention to be resolved by British judges in accordance with British approaches to the interpretation of legal texts. For the opponents of incorporation, that might be a disadvantage, as it could give unelected judges the power to question and strike down laws passed by Parliament, whereas the present arrangements at least give Parliament some discretion in how a breach identified in Strasbourg might best be remedied. The evidence from other countries suggests that incorporation might not affect the number of British cases taken to Strasbourg as much as is sometimes supposed.

In practice, there have already been cases in which British courts have taken account of the convention to assist in the interpretation of British law, and some have argued that incorporation is already almost an accomplished fact. The increasing reliance on the convention as a yardstick for European Union legislation and the introduction of references to it in EU treaties are taken as a further pointer in that direction. Certainly, judgments handed down in Strasbourg have already had significant effects on British law and, more important, practice. There have been a number of rulings either partly or entirely against the United Kingdom.

I urge the Government to remember that the English system of law is predominantly remedy rather than rights based, be it in statute or under the common law. We have only to look at some of the convention's articles to realise that in some respects everything contained in them is already part of our law while in others they bring us dangerously close to creating a conflict between the House and our judiciary. Some of the articles read as follows:

"Article 3

No one shall be subjected to torture or inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment."

We all agree with that.

"Article 4.1

No one shall be held in slavery or servitude.

Article 5.1

Everyone has the right to liberty and security of person.

Article 6.1

In the determination of his civil rights and obligations or of any criminal charge against him, everyone is entitled to a fair and public hearing within a reasonable time . . .

Article 7.1

No one shall be held guilty of any criminal offence on account of any act or omission which did not constitute a criminal offence under national or international law at the time when it was committed.

Article 8.1

Everyone has the right to respect for his private and family life, his home and his correspondence.

Article 9.1

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; . . .

Article 10.1

Everyone has the right to freedom of expression. This right shall include freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authority and regardless of frontiers."

The document containing those articles should be firmly pinned on the wall in the Government Whips Office so that Labour Members are entitled to hold and express the thoughts that they were elected to express and advocate. However, I suspect that the Minister without Portfolio, the hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson), and his friends of the night will not allow the contents of such a document to enter the heads of the new hon. Members. We shall see.

It is important to bear in mind what my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North-East Bedfordshire said about there being exceptions to the rights that are set out. Signatories to the convention are allowed to depart from the articles, and it will be for judges and not for Parliament to decide whether an Act of Parliament or an act by the Government is in line with the popular will or the provisions of the European convention.

I do not have a religious or philosophical or other principled objection to incorporation of the convention. However, I ask the Government to think carefully about the constitutional and political effects of such a move. My family has provided Members of Parliament since the reign of Henry VIII and we should remember that, for centuries, this place has been the protector and guarantor of human rights. We should not transfer that work to others without the clearest possible reasons and the most detailed examination. The burden of proof is on the Government and the standard of proof must be the highest possible.

1.17 pm

Mr. Gareth Thomas (Clwyd, West): I am grateful for the opportunity to make my maiden speech so early in the Parliament. I think that I am the first "new Labour" Member to make a maiden speech today. The constituency that I have the privilege to represent results from the most recent parliamentary boundary review, which brought about major changes to the constituencies that were formerly contained in the old county council area of Clwyd.

My constituency is in the central part of north Wales and is probably the Principality's most diverse constituency. It consists of a coastal belt stretching from Rhos-on-Sea and Colwyn Bay to the outskirts of Rhyl. It has a large rural hinterland comprising the county borough of Conwy and the new Denbighshire. It includes in its boundaries the famous historic town of Ruthin which was for so long associated with the major historical figure of Owain Glyndwr.

[Mr. Gareth Thomas]

The area that I represent was formerly represented by two hon. Members, my hon. Friend the Member for the new constituency of Clwyd, South (Mr. Jones) and Mr. Rod Richards. Until the general election, Mr. Richards was described as the safest Tory in Wales.

My hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd, South has represented the rural parts of my constituency since 1987. He is held in high esteem as an assiduous Member and he has a large personal following, based, I am sure, on his experience and expertise in agriculture and the environment, which are major concerns of my constituents.

Mr. Rod Richards, the former Member for Clwyd, North-West, was a politician with a robust, not to say at times combative, style, which many Members would say was at variance with that of his Conservative predecessor, Sir Anthony Meyer, who, to this day, is held in high regard, even in staunchly Labour areas of my constituency. Perhaps what can be said on behalf of Mr. Richards is that he brought a touch of iconoclasm to political debate in Wales, a country—and I speak as a Welshman and am proud of the fact—whose institutions are perhaps sometimes over-sensitive to criticism.

Mr. Richards and I fought a good-natured contest. He accepted defeat gracefully and I wish him and his family well as he readjusts to a life outside Westminster. Clwyd, West was regarded as the safest Conservative seat in Wales and its loss has meant that the Conservative party has no parliamentary representation in Wales, a matter which hon. Members may feel has some significance in the context of our debate on the constitutional aspects of the Gracious Speech.

The Conservative party has long since ceased to be a serious force in local government in Wales. During the past 18 years, Conservative rule has been exercised through an increasingly powerful and unaccountable Welsh Office and through an array of quangos, which, to a large extent, have been filled with persons sympathetic to the Conservative party. A substantial majority of my constituents will welcome the commitment in the Gracious Speech to establish a Welsh Assembly to renew our democracy in Wales.

I am pleased to note that the voting arrangements in respect of that assembly will contain a substantial element of proportionality. I am sure that due regard will be given to regional interests in Wales, particularly those of north Wales.

The assembly will provide a national focus, which is much needed in Wales. It will develop a strategy for economic regeneration and it will improve not only accountability, but, most important, the quality of decision making. That is particularly apposite in a country that has had two major mistakes imposed on it: nursery vouchers and major local government reorganisation, which was imposed without proper consultation.

I fought the election on a strongly pro-devolution platform, in marked contrast to my Conservative opponent, who maintained an implacable hostility to any concept of devolution. Clwyd, West is notable because the anti-Tory vote was split. Plaid Cymru and the Liberal Democrats have respectable support in that region.

The fact that many supporters of those parties voted Labour is a hopeful sign that there will be strong cross-party unity in the forthcoming referendum campaign in Wales for a yes vote.

I applaud the sentiments of my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, Kelvin (Mr. Galloway), who said that we had to be inclusive in our approach. I am sure that we will be. There are indications that some prominent Welsh Tories are prepared to reconsider their hostility to devolution and to accept a more realistic approach to constitutional reform. That will be welcomed by many of my constituents.

I am pleased to be able to serve my constituency. It is a great privilege. Colwyn Bay is the largest town in my constituency and the second largest in north Wales. Towards the end of the last century, it grew as a popular holiday and retirement area for people from north-west England. Its development was inextricably linked to the railway and its continued economic well-being will require improvements and electrification of the north Wales line, a matter which I will pursue in this Parliament.

Colwyn Bay benefits from a magnificent coastal position with a spectacular backdrop of mountains and hills. However, it is fair to say that, in common with many parts of this country and with the neighbouring communities of Abergale and Kinnel Bay, it has suffered economic decline in recent years. Unemployment, low wages, poor housing and crime are serious concerns of my constituents. They will welcome the proposals contained in the Gracious Speech to tackle the social evils of unemployment, exploitation in the workplace and poor housing. The Government's proposals to combat crime will also meet with approval.

The future of Colwyn Bay lies in diversity. I expect to be able to support the work of major employers, such as Quinton Hazell in Mochdre. It is also necessary to pursue new initiatives, particularly in Colwyn Bay. We have a splendid Victorian pier which requires renovation and an injection of funds. We need to work in Ruthin on the well-known building, Nant Clwyd house: it is a major amenity in the area, and also requires an initiative.

My constituency has the highest percentage of persons of pensionable age in Wales: it is one of the highest in the United Kingdom. The great many pensioners that I represent will welcome the Government's proposals for a reduction in VAT on domestic fuel and our plans to improve the health service. There is grave concern among the ranks of pensioners about the dramatic decline in the value of the state old-age pension and about the future of long-term care. I am sure that the Government will address those issues in due course.

What unites my diverse constituency is the belief that our future lies in a high-quality education system that will enable us to compete in the global economy not on the basis of low wages—which is the Conservative party's vision—but on our skills and education. My constituency has four successful secondary schools and an important college of further education at Llandrillo. There is also a vibrant agricultural college at Llysfas in the south of the constituency. The Government's avowed intention to make education their number one priority strikes a cord with many of my constituents. Cuts in expenditure and increases in class sizes are matters of grave concern to them. The recent announcement that the nursery voucher scheme in Wales will be scrapped was widely welcomed.

The need to maintain a strong rural economy is vital to many of my constituents. I hope to work closely with the National Farmers Union and the Farmers Union of Wales on matters of concern to farmers. Foremost among those concerns is the need to lift the beef ban following the fiasco of the BSE crisis. My constituents will welcome the constructive, united and positive approach that the new Government have adopted. Only by working in that way will we have a realistic prospect of removing the ban.

The right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague) is fond of lists. In his nit-picking analysis—which was described as “no change Unionism” by my hon. Friend the Member for Kelvin—he gave us a long list of various defects. I congratulate him on his engagement to a well-known Welsh speaker. I shall give him a list of place names in my constituency: Llanfair Dyffryn Clywd, Llanbedr Duffryn Clwyd, Llanfair Talhaiarn, Llangynhafal, Llanrhaeadr yng Nahinmeirch, Llangernyw and Llanarmon-yn-Ial. As those wonderful Welsh names suggest, the Welsh language is one of the oldest in Europe. It is alive and kicking in my constituency.

My constituency has a strong tradition of local eisteddfod, and can lay claim to one of the most important bards in Wales—Gwilym Hiraethog, to whom a statue has been erected in the important village of Llansannan. This year, the Urdd—which is one of the largest youth movements in Europe—celebrates its 75th birthday. I applaud the movement and its great work, not only among the Welsh-speaking community but among the English-speaking community in Wales.

I applaud the Gracious Speech. It heralds a new Britain and a new Wales.

1.30 pm

Mr. Adrian Sanders (Clwyd, West): I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Clwyd, West (Mr. Thomas), who eloquently provided the House and me with an insight into his constituency. He also paid an eloquent tribute to his predecessors, not that I—being a new hon. Member—have met either one of them. This is my maiden speech, and it is a great honour to be making it.

I am the new Member of Parliament for the constituency of Torbay—the English Riviera. After the general election, I was described in my local newspaper as “Sanders of the Riviera”—a description which we did not dare put on our election posters before the general election, although we may do so at the next one.

It is customary to pay tribute to one's predecessor. Mr. Rupert Allason—who is also known as Nigel West, the writer of spy novels—was a colourful character, and one thing that the Conservative Benches are perhaps missing is some of the colourful characters who lost in the general election. He was certainly one of them.

Rupert Allason was an hon. Member about whom people held strong opinions, one way or the other. Many people thought that he was an excellent Member of Parliament, whereas others held a contrary opinion, which is their right. His constituency will miss him. He had 10 years as an hon. Member, which is a good innings for anyone. With a majority of 12, I would be glad to serve as an hon. Member for 10 years; 10 years in the House—if not longer—would suit me fine.

My constituency is part of the west country, but it is a little different from the rest of the west country. It is an urban and not a rural constituency. I think that I have three farms in my constituency, and I suspect that one of them is a fish farm. As a west country constituency, therefore, it is a little different.

We look out to sea on one side, and we have hills behind us. Beyond them, in the hinterlands, are the moors. Our climate is different from that in the rest of the west country. We are on the Gulf stream and are famed for our palm trees, which are able to survive the winters. The temperatures on our coastline are always one or two degrees higher than they are only a few miles inland, and it is a very pleasant climate for those who have chosen to move to the area to retire. It is a very nice place for retirement, but it is also a very nice place to visit—which is why tourism has been, and remains, our primary industry, although it is not our only one.

Yesterday, I heard the maiden speech of the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Mr. Turner), and I almost thought that he was describing my constituency. He talked about the facades of Regency houses in Brighton, and the social problems and deprivation that lies behind them. In my constituency, the palm trees and gardens provide the facade, but behind those we have the same problems.

We also have a problem of low incomes. A characteristic that we share with the rest of the west country is that we have some of the lowest incomes in the United Kingdom. That has been a major problem for many years, but I hope that the Government will be able to do something to lift people out of poverty and give them more opportunity to find work and create wealth themselves. Small businesses are vital to our local economy. Anything that we can do to help small businesses will be good for my constituents.

My constituency also has a major problem with development. Being an urban area, its growth is restricted. There are hills behind it—it was built on seven hills—so it cannot expand any further. Over the years, houses have been converted into flats, which have been converted into even smaller flats, so there is a great deal of overcrowding.

Developers have a beady eye on the green fields which the Government also expect local authorities to use for housing. That must be resisted because the great attraction of our area is its environment. If we build on it, we shall lose our greatest asset. The major challenge facing us is to balance the demand for extra housing and economic activity with the need to protect our environment.

The environment was high on the list of issues that electors mentioned during the campaign. I hope that the Government will strengthen the Environment Agency and that it will enforce higher standards of water quality so that our sewerage and water treatment scheme, undertaken by the infamous South West Water, includes secondary as well as primary treatment. Stronger European directives are on their way. The treatment scheme currently envisaged for my constituency offers only primary treatment whereas we need secondary treatment to raise it to the standards to be applied in future. We cannot fall behind other tourist resorts in the south-west which already have what is known as the clean sweep programme.

[Mr. Adrian Sanders]

Many issues were raised during the general election, but I shall pick up only on those that are peculiar to my constituency. That brings me back to the issue of water. We have to pay the highest water and sewerage charges in the country, which means that 3 per cent. of the population are expected to meet the cost of cleaning up 30 per cent. of the nation's coastline. That has to be rectified, given that the area has such low incomes.

I urge all hon. Members, especially those who have never visited my constituency, to come to the south-west for a break and sample what we have to offer. Torbay has a future as a tourist resort. The quality of its accommodation has improved dramatically and we have improved the shoulders of the season for the short-term break. However, we need more help from the Government to promote tourism as the south-west does not get as much help as other regions. We need a fair deal in that respect, as in others.

The debate is about the constitution, and I shall deal with one narrow aspect—electoral regulations. All of us are aware of the byzantine rules on election expenses and the various forms that we had to fill in before and after the election. How many of us wondered why there is a space on the nomination paper asking for a "description" of the candidate? I am sure that we all know of candidates who wrote, for example, "farmer" or "banker" when they should have said whether they were a Labour or Liberal Democrat candidate. A couple of years ago, a council candidate in my constituency, who we hoped would sit for us, wrote "bored housewife with masochistic tendencies". It was acceptable under the six-word rule, but it did not really describe her politics.

Those descriptions are there to help voters in their choice and to guide them as to the politics of the candidates. I am afraid that the rules have been abused in the past few years by people who have taken advantage of English law, which does not recognise political parties. They have tried to spoil elections by using a description that confuses voters about which party they represent.

I speak with considerable personal experience because I was the Liberal Democrat candidate for Devon and East Plymouth at the 1994 European election, when a Liberal Democrat candidate, whose surname came above mine on the ballot paper, because it began with an H, polled 12,000 votes without having put out any literature or posters or being interviewed. People told us afterwards and signed affidavits saying that they did not know the name of the candidate.

It is difficult for candidates to get their name known across seven parliamentary constituencies at a European election. Perhaps it is a little easier in one parliamentary constituency, but there are problems even then—we have only to look at what happened in Winchester, where somebody stood as a Liberal Democrat and polled 650 votes. The eventual winner was elected with a majority of just two. That is nice for me, because I have a majority of just 12 and at least I can say that I have a majority six times the size of somebody else's. I do not know how many other hon. Members can say that.

My point is a serious one. We do not need a big change to rectify the situation. An animal welfare activist group threatened to put up a number of Conservative candidates at the last election. I do not believe that it carried out that

threat, but the threat is always there that people might seek to undermine our democratic process. I spoke to people after the European election about how their vote did not go the way that they intended. They had a real sense of having had their democratic rights stolen.

We have to accept that people vote for parties. Some people still vote for the person, but most decide to go with a party. If they do not know the name of the candidate, they will look down the list for the first description that closely matches the party for which they have decided to vote. Therein lies the problem for those of us with a surname beginning with a letter towards the end of the alphabet. I hope that during this Parliament—the sooner, the better—something can be done to correct the problem and get rid of the fear of people's votes being stolen and the wrong people being elected.

Only a few spoiler candidates would have been needed in a few significant constituencies at the general election to undermine the democratic process, stealing a few Conservative votes by standing as Conservative party candidates, as people are entitled to do under the law. We could then have had a change of Government based on mistakes rather than on the way in which people intended to vote.

I am proud and honoured to represent Torbay. It is the constituency where I was born, where I have lived for most of my life and where most members of my family still reside. I look forward to doing the best job that I can for my constituents in the next few years, highlighting some of the area's special characteristics and problems and perhaps sharing some of the good news that I hope that there will be over the years for my constituents.

1.43 pm

Mr. Paul Burstow (Sutton and Cheam): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to make my maiden speech so early. Before I do so, I must congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Mr. Sanders) on his excellent maiden speech and on drawing the House's attention to an important issue, the way in which the description on the ballot paper can mislead the electorate, and the need for legislation.

I thank the people of Sutton and Cheam for returning me as their Member of Parliament. My predecessor, Lady Olga Maitland, represented Sutton and Cheam for five years. She was an assiduous attender and participant in debates and Divisions in this House. Indeed, I understand from the Library that she was in the top 22 for oral questions in the previous Session. She was and is a forceful personality who pursues causes in which she believes with great energy.

This is not the first occasion on which a Liberal or Liberal Democrat has been sent to Parliament by Sutton and Cheam electors. In 1972, my colleague and friend Graham Tope, now Lord Tope, was elected in a sensational by-election. He started an all-too-brief career in December 1972 by delivering his maiden speech a little over two hours after taking his seat. I am pleased that I did not have to go through that ritual.

It is a great source of pride to me to be part of the largest Liberal Democrat parliamentary party since 1929. I have no doubt that my election in Sutton and Cheam owes much to the hard work and leadership of Lord Tope in the constituency over the past quarter century.

Sutton and Cheam, for those who are not so familiar with it, is in south-west London, just 13 miles from this Chamber. The constituency nestles on the edge of the north downs and it is, I believe, one of the greenest constituencies in London, both in terms of its politics and in terms of its environment. Indeed, it has the greatest tree cover in London. It is a great place to live. It is the place where I was born and it is the place where I wish to continue living.

Sutton and Cheam has, on any measure, some of the best schools in our country. I have the pleasure of being a school governor of Westbourne primary school. It has just received one of the most glowing Office for Standards in Education reports that I have had the opportunity to read. It is all strengths and no weaknesses—a real tribute to the staff and pupils of that school.

A number of concerns were raised with me as I was out campaigning in the general election. One concern that I am particularly keen to draw to the House's attention is the effect of the Greenwich judgment. It is a judgment by the courts, which effectively denies to many children in my constituency the opportunity of getting a place in the school that their parents choose for them. In some cases, it is denying children a place in a high school in my constituency altogether. I am determined to press for legislation to change the law and thus lift the stress and burden that many parents feel as a consequence of the transfer to high school and of the way in which the judgment penalises them.

The single most important issue that came up on the doorsteps in my constituency during the general election was the health service and the financial crisis in which the previous Government had left it. My and my constituents' local hospital is St. Helier hospital. Even as the election campaign was proceeding, a ward was being closed. That was on top of the spectacle of many people being forced to wait for hours during the winter on trolleys to get treatment in accident and emergency. It is vital that the Government act not only to safeguard the health service, but to go beyond that. They must stop the closures, employ more nurses and doctors, make sure that we see real cuts in bureaucracy and give additional resources to our health service.

During the general election, I was greatly impressed by the many people who expressed concerns to me about the rights of disabled people. I was much heartened yesterday, therefore, when I heard the Secretary of State for Education and Employment say that he would review the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. I believe that the Act falls well short of the comprehensive civil rights legislation that disabled people want and are entitled to. Although I welcome much of what is in the Queen's Speech, I am sorry that it was silent on that question.

I hope that the Government will do more than simply incorporate the European convention on human rights into UK law, welcome though that is. We need a powerful human rights commission to strengthen the protection of individual rights, and that includes the rights of disabled people. Disability is a social and political issue as well as a physical one. An impairment becomes a disability as much if not more because of social and political barriers. Rather than accepting exclusion, the emphasis must be on identifying and removing external barriers. I hope that the Government will accept that principle when they review the Disability Discrimination Act.

Fundamentally, civil rights for disabled people are about removing the political and social barriers that often cause physical barriers. They are about changing attitudes and challenging the "Does he take sugar?" attitude towards disabled people. In opposition, many Labour Members took a lead in promoting such a change. I hope that, in government, that commitment will shine through.

As a councillor for the past 11 years, I believe passionately in the need for decentralisation, which is vital for renewing our democratic life and for rebuilding a sense of community. Therefore, I hope that the Government will introduce legislation to give local government a power of general competence to act for the common good and in the service of local communities.

Earlier today, there was talk of flow charts and the way in which the incorporation of the European convention on human rights would affect this place. I was elected as a councillor to the London borough of Sutton in 1986, the year of the demise of the Greater London council. I had the opportunity to serve on some of the joint boards that dealt with such matters after abolition; we have faced a chaotic mess in London in the past 18 years as a result of that abolition. I look forward to the creation of a new strategic authority for London. However, the test for the Government will be how far they delegate powers from Whitehall to a new strategic authority and how little they encroach on the London boroughs.

There is a new mood in the country. The Government begin their administration with a great fund of good will. Now is the time and the opportunity to modernise Britain's outdated institutions, rebuild a sense of trust, renew democracy and give Britain's nations, regions and local communities a greater say in our affairs. I hope that Parliament will address those issues. If it does, it will make a real difference.

Mr. Richard Livsey (Brecon and Radnorshire): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I have sat here for four hours and 20 minutes as the only Opposition Member present representing a Welsh constituency. I regard the House as having a reputation for fairness, but no Opposition Member representing a Welsh constituency has been able to contribute to today's debate on constitutional reform. As a Welshman, I am used to being treated with contempt, but I would not have expected my nation to be disgraced in this way in the House. I am sure that that was not your intention, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and that it will not happen again. If the Secretary of State for Wales will allow me, I shall attempt to intervene in his speech.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): The hon. Gentleman has some experience of the House and he knows the difficulties of the Chair, particularly early in a Parliament when a great number of new Members are seeking to catch one's eye and make a maiden speech. His party has had very adequate representation in that respect. I hope that he will recognise that it is a matter of taking the rough with the smooth and that no slight to the nation of Wales was ever intended.

1.52 pm

Mr. Michael Ancram (Devizes): We all appreciate the difficulties that you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and your colleagues have on these occasions in trying to fit in all

[*Mr. Michael Ancram*]

those who wish to speak. I congratulate you and your colleagues on your appointment. We are certainly pleased to see you in the Chair and we look forward to the way in which you will handle our deliberations in the months and years ahead.

I also congratulate the Secretary of State for Scotland. He and I go back a long way, even further than the hon. Member for Glasgow, Kelvin (Mr. Galloway), in that we go back to the days when we were both practising in different branches of the law in Scotland and we sometimes found ourselves working on the same side. I wish the right hon. Gentleman well in his endeavours. I also congratulate the Secretary of State for Wales, with whom I have not had as long a connection. Although I have had political experience in Scotland, England and Northern Ireland, I have yet to have political experience in Wales and I wish him well.

This has been a wide-ranging debate. We have touched on a number of important constitutional issues. Although I suspect that we shall have to await further detail on many of them before we can do them justice, the debate has been an important opportunity for a first trot around the course of the constitutional reforms that the Government are suggesting.

We have had a veritable clutch of maiden speeches of a very high quality. I particularly pay tribute to the hon. Member for Keighley (Mrs. Cryer), who spoke with great dignity and feeling about her constituency and her concerns for the problems of people there. I am sure that she will contribute in the Chamber on many other occasions.

I should also like to congratulate the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr. Twigg) and particularly thank him for his generous tribute to Michael Portillo. I cannot say that I agree with everything that the hon. Gentleman said, but I congratulate him on the way in which he made his case.

The hon. Member for Galloway and Upper Nithsdale (Mr. Morgan) also made his maiden speech, and I thank him for his remarks about my friend Ian Lang. The hon. Gentleman obviously has an affection for his constituency, which is indeed shared by many of us who have travelled through and stayed in it on many occasions.

The hon. Member for Hornchurch (Mr. Cryer) made his maiden speech, and I congratulate him, too. I noticed the place from where he spoke, which was reminiscent of that occupied by his father. Indeed, the style with which he spoke was also reminiscent, although I am not sure whether under the new dispensation of the Minister without Portfolio he will be allowed quite the independence that his father used to exercise in the House. The hon. Gentleman found an echo of support on the Opposition Benches for some of the remarks that he made about the Maastricht treaty and the single currency.

I also congratulate the hon. Member for Clwyd, West (Mr. Thomas). He paid tribute to his predecessor, Rod Richards, referring to him as blunt and iconoclastic. Opposition Members found such a style refreshing in the Chamber. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman did not mean his comments in anything other than a favourable sense. He made a well-constructed and well-argued speech and I look forward to debating many constitutional issues with him in future.

The hon. Member for Torbay (Mr. Sanders) made a powerful speech. He paid tribute to his predecessor, Rupert Allason. I was impressed by the extempore way in which he delivered his speech. Although he might not be literal, he is certainly literate. I finally congratulate the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow), who paid tribute to his predecessor, Lady Olga Maitland. He also made a fine speech. The speeches that we heard from those whose first occasion it was in the House give us some confidence in the quality of debate in future.

I now refer to the speeches made by other hon. Members and hon. Friends. I shall be brief because I realise that we have constraints on our time. I want to leave plenty of time for the Secretary of State for Wales to answer the detailed questions put by my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague), which, rather to my surprise, have been referred to as nit-picking. If trying to get constitutional reform right and securing the constitution are regarded as nit-picking by certain hon. Members, I fear very much for our constitution. Some very powerful questions were put. I expect, as does the rest of the House, to hear answers to them from the Secretary of State for Wales. I shall come in a moment to certain other questions that were asked as powerfully, by the hon. Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell), but should first refer to one or two other comments.

My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North-East Bedfordshire (Sir N. Lyell) spoke, as did my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Harborough (Mr. Garnier), about the European convention on human rights. They both spoke with a good deal of expertise. We shall have to look closely at the implications of incorporation in the light of what they said. There is certainly much more work to be done.

The hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Mr. Mitchell) lifted the veil a little by saying that the new dawn was about building socialism after the election. I am not sure whether he cleared that with the Minister without Portfolio before he said it. Such a belief is certainly what many of us have suspected for some time.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke) made one of his usual gracious speeches, but, for all the wit and humour, the message was strong and powerful. I pay tribute to him for what he said. He made it clear that he would regard any attempt to short-change the Chamber in terms of the debate on constitutional matters as—I think that these were the words that he used—something akin to tyranny. I hope that those words were listened to by Government Front Benchers.

The hon. Member for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble) spoke from the Northern Ireland perspective. We on the Opposition Benches also want an end to direct rule and the creation of institutions of locally accountable democracy in Northern Ireland. That can be achieved only by agreement and by addressing the various relationships within Northern Ireland, between the north and the south and between the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland. The way in which that is done must be broadly acceptable to both parts of the community in Northern Ireland. I wish the talks process success when it resumes in June, and I take this opportunity to wish the Government success in advancing it. I was pleased to hear the hon. Member for Upper Bann endorse the talks

process and I hope that when he returns to it on 3 June, he will demonstrate the political will and determination to make real progress.

The main and most urgent legislation that the House faces is, of course, the Referendums (Scotland and Wales) Bill, which was published yesterday. My right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond, Yorks posed a number of questions about the Bill and, although we shall debate it next week, it is worth reiterating some of our concerns. Several hon. Members and hon. Friends have made the point that it would be more appropriate to have a referendum after the legislation had passed through the House, so that the people of Scotland and Wales knew what they were voting for. It is noticeable that the Bill mentions agreement to a Scottish Parliament and a Welsh Assembly, not to the Scottish Parliament or the Welsh Assembly proposed by the Government. The Bill does not even refer to a White Paper, but refers merely to a vague concept. That fills me with suspicion about whether the purpose of the Bill is to allow the Scottish and Welsh people to say yes to a general concept and thus to allow the Government to do what they want, regardless of the wishes of the people of Scotland and Wales.

Why is there no threshold in the Bill? The Secretary of State for Scotland is looking at me in surprise, but if only 10 or 20 per cent. of the Scottish people bothered to vote in a referendum, would he regard that as a mandate to proceed with constitutional change? Or does he, like me, believe that the result will need some credibility from the numbers who vote before a mandate is created? I put that question for answer next week, because we feel strongly about the issue.

Mr. Salmond: I find it difficult to believe that the right hon. Member for Devizes (Mr. Ancram) is following the route of the leadership candidates, the right hon. Members for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague) and for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood). He surely cannot be suggesting a threshold—a blocking mechanism or a 50 per cent. rule—that his party would not apply to other constitutional legislation, such as would be necessary for a single currency. Will he say now whether the Conservative party would insist on a threshold for legislation on a single currency? If not, it is not the Chamber that will be short-changed, but the people of Scotland and Wales, by the Conservative party.

Mr. Ancram: My question, and I am entitled to put it also to the leader of the Scottish National party, is whether a referendum, to have any credibility, should have a minimum requirement for a percentage of the electorate to vote. If not, we could see extraordinary anomalies being created in the constitution that would be justified by the Government through the referendum, even though a majority of the people in the relevant parts of the United Kingdom might not have voted, let alone voted for the proposition. In a democracy, we must take that issue seriously.

Will the results of the referendums be announced only on an all-Scotland and all-Wales basis? Last time, we were told the regional results. If that is the case, I fear that we are seeing another attempt to cover up the fact that areas of Scotland are frightened of being run by the central belt of Scotland. My right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond, Yorks asked where the money would come from, and he gave the figures. Will the money be taken—

the people of Scotland and Wales have a right to know—from the education, health or transport budgets? In this current climate of economic discipline proposed by the Secretary of State for Scotland and his colleagues, the people have a right to know.

I come to the main concept of devolution. We oppose the Labour Government's proposals for a Scottish Parliament and a Welsh Assembly because we believe that they will launch us on a slippery slope to the break-up of the United Kingdom. I fear that a Scottish Parliament would swiftly become the focus for growing resentment and discontent on both sides of the border. What is being proposed is a unilateral form of devolution that is structurally unstable, and would not be able to stand for long on its own. In the end, the genuine aspirations of the Scottish and Welsh people, far from being served by such a structure, could be undermined and ultimately destroyed.

Scotland has for far too long been sold by both Labour and Liberal Democrat politicians the fantasy that a Scottish Parliament will cure all her ills, imagined and real alike. But when, as is inevitable, it does not, or if the Scots find themselves paying more than the rest of the United Kingdom, there will be a surge of disappointment and discontent.

It does not take a cynic to understand how quickly a Scottish Parliament would, for its own protection, seek to shift the blame for that to what it would call the parsimonious actions of Westminster. "Not enough money, not enough power," would be the cry. The result would be to increase the bitterness in Scotland against the rest of the United Kingdom, and it would be naive in the extreme not to see how that would accelerate the move towards the breaking up of the United Kingdom.

Moreover, we should not overestimate the patience of those outside Scotland who look at present subventions and feel that Scotland has not done half badly. If they feel that they are constantly asked to pay more through the block grant to protect the stability of the Scottish Parliament, the day will come when they will say, "Enough."

That is why constitutional change is not simply a Scottish or a Welsh matter. It affects the whole of the United Kingdom, and must be treated in Parliament accordingly. The hon. Member for Linlithgow made that point powerfully.

Whichever way we look at it, the issues at stake are significant and historic. We might have expected the Government of the so-called new dawn to advance their proposals confidently, prepared to argue them fully and steadily against all comers. Instead, we see a Government determined to rush the legislation through. Yesterday, the Secretary of State charmingly described that as "maintaining momentum".

I am sorry to see that even the right hon. Gentleman has fallen under the spell of the Minister without Portfolio, and is practising the art of Mandelspeak. The art is to pretend that a change is not really controversial—that the taxing powers are no different from those of a parish council, and that the matter is merely one of good governance, affecting Wales and Scotland but not the rest of the United Kingdom, which therefore need not concern itself. That is rather like saying that divorce affects only one partner in a marriage. It is nonsense and the Government know it; it is a dangerous travesty of what they are about.

[Mr. Ancram]

Let us look at the consequences for the rest of the United Kingdom of what is proposed. There will be parts of the kingdom where, on matters of significant policy, the writ of this sovereign Parliament will no longer run. The old West Lothian question is still important.

For instance, Labour told us during the election that its top priority was education, education, education. That is the platform on which each Labour Member was elected by his or her constituents. Yet if the proposals go through, even the Secretary of State for Scotland will have no vote and no say on education in his own constituency, which elected him on that mandate—unless, of course, he stands for the Scottish Parliament. Perhaps he will let us know whether he intends to do so.

Similarly, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the Foreign Secretary and the Secretary of State for Defence, as well as many junior Ministers, will by their own vote have abdicated that for which they were elected. However, they will be able to vote on education in my constituency, where they were not elected.

The constitutional anomaly goes even further. In the public expenditure survey round, the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, who are both Scottish Members, will decide what is spent on health, education and roads in English constituencies, but not in Scottish constituencies. They will be able to decide for my constituency, but not for their own. On any view, that is a constitutional travesty of the concept of elected representation and accountability. It goes to the very heart of the credibility of our constitution.

That is why the proposal is not just a Scottish or Welsh issue, but affects the whole of the United Kingdom—and not only in its anomalies. It will bring into sharp relief the heavy over-representation of Scotland at Westminster, long justified by the lack of devolution, and the over-subvention in Scotland, which has long been justified by Scotland's special needs. Both of those would be rendered unfair within the United Kingdom by the creation of a Scottish Parliament.

So much for the argument that the change is moderate. It is a major constitutional change which will send shock waves throughout the United Kingdom and fundamentally alter our constitution, undermining the sovereignty of this Parliament. I give notice that we will resist it.

A chilling arrogance is emerging in the Government and new Labour. New Labour assumes that because it believes something, no one has a right to question it—that because something was in its manifesto, no one has a right to debate and determine it in Parliament, but that it can, and should, simply go ahead. I say to the Government that they are wrong—profoundly wrong, constitutionally wrong and democratically wrong.

On 1 May, the people did not elect an executive presidency, however much the Prime Minister fancies himself in that role. The people elected a Government answerable and accountable to Parliament, and Parliament cannot be bypassed or short-changed. It has a right to discuss, scrutinise and determine every significant aspect of the manifesto before it is implemented. That is what Parliament is about, and nowhere more so than on the constitution. That is why all the Bills proposing schemes of devolution must be taken on the Floor of the House.

They go to the heart of the United Kingdom and they affect the whole. It would be a travesty of our constitution if they were not subjected in detail to the scrutiny of all who represent all parts of the United Kingdom.

We are in the House to represent our constituencies and we have a right to be heard. We will not be told that the election determined this debate. Elections confer powers, but they cannot alter truths or convictions any more than they can turn night into day. Nor do we in our party discard our deeply held principles and beliefs just to suit the changing wind.

Let me make it clear that, whatever the Prime Minister may think, we do not see the future of our constitution and of the United Kingdom as games-playing. We believe passionately and fundamentally that what is being proposed will lead inexorably to the break-up of the United Kingdom. We believe that the Union has been a force for stability, strength and good—tested and proved in the cauldron of the events of this century. That is the truth to which we hold and that is our fear. No amount of sleight of hand, no slick propaganda, no weight of votes can change that or stop us voicing those fears. We will voice them here in Parliament. We will voice them as the Bills go through. We will voice them with all our strength in the referendum campaigns in Scotland and Wales and we will voice them in the rest of the United Kingdom.

This Union and this constitution are not games to be played. They are the hard-won birthright and heritage of all our people and we will not betray them by treating them as games. Our adherence to the concept of one nation is not just words to win votes. It goes to the heart of everything in which we believe. We give notice today that to us these issues are fundamental. We will not be deflected from them. We will fight for them with every means at our disposal.

2.12 pm

The Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Ron Davies):

The debate today is not only about devolution but about the position of the constitution generally. I am sure that the right hon. Member for Devizes (Mr. Ancram) appreciates that. I thank him on behalf of the Secretary of State for Scotland—my right hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, Anniesland (Mr. Dewar)—and myself for the good wishes that he expressed to both of us at the start of the debate. I in turn wish him well in what will be a difficult and arduous task in the years to come. As he said, we have not debated together on many previous occasions, but I hope that we shall spend a long time in our present respective positions and get to know each other much better in the years to come.

I should like to reply to two particular points that the right hon. Member for Devizes made. First, let me assure him that, well before the referendums are held in Scotland and Wales, White Papers will be produced for both Scotland and Wales and the people of both countries will be adequately informed of what the Government propose. Secondly, the right hon. Gentleman spoke movingly and properly about the rights of Parliament. Let me assure him

that Parliament will decide its own procedures for dealing with those matters. That is an appropriate way to deal with them.

Mr. Bernard Jenkin: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr. Davies: No, I want to make a little progress. If there is time, I will give way later, but I have a number of points that I wish to cover.

This has been a well-attended, interesting and well-informed debate. I apologise that I shall not respond directly to the many powerful speeches that we have heard from both sides of the House, except for my responses to the speeches of new Members of Parliament and of two others—the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague), who opened the debate, and the leader of the Ulster Unionists, the hon. Member for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble).

I pay tribute to the maiden speeches made today. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley (Mrs. Cryer) on her election and assure her that there is a warm welcome for her in the House. It was a poignant occasion for her, as her late husband was a very active and well-respected Member of the House. Her son now represents the constituency of Hornchurch, so it will be a memorable occasion for her. She has already given notice that she will be an independent champion of liberty—a cause that will be appreciated on both sides of the House.

My hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr. Twigg) also spoke and I warmly congratulate him on his magnificent victory. That victory will be welcomed by many hon. Members, and I can assure him that not all of them sit on the Government Benches. My hon. Friend paid a fulsome tribute to his predecessor. He also spoke powerfully, eloquently and knowledgeably of his constituency and of his commitment to constitutional reform. He has made an early mark in this Parliament and he will always be listened to with great interest.

The hon. Member for Galloway and Upper Nithsdale (Mr. Morgan) paid tribute to his predecessor, Mr. Ian Lang, which will be appreciated by Conservative colleagues of the former right hon. Member. The hon. Gentleman spoke knowledgeably of his constituency and his country and I am sure that he will make a mark in this Parliament.

I welcome my hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch (Mr. Cryer) and congratulate him on his memorable victory over Robin Squire, who was a senior and well-respected member of the House. The new Member for Hornchurch, in his presentation and in his forceful and direct speech, reminded me very much of his father, whom I knew very well. Like his father, he will be a Member to reckon with.

My hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd, West (Mr. Thomas) was the only Member from Wales to make a maiden speech. He paid tribute to both his predecessors, Sir Wyn Roberts and Rod Richards. He will be interested to know that Sir Wyn Roberts declared his support this morning for an elected Assembly for Wales. As Sir Wyn was a well-liked and respected Member of the House—he was the longest serving Welsh Office Minister that we ever had—and as he retired at the last election with the full knowledge of contemporary politics and the problems of our democracy in Wales, his views will carry a great

deal of weight. He is, of course, only the latest to join a growing chorus of Conservative party members and leaders in Wales who now acknowledge that we must have a commitment to devolution.

The election victory of my hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd, West gave me particular satisfaction as he took the last Conservative seat in Wales. His speech was confident, thoughtful and well delivered. In managing to pay an eloquent tribute to Rod Richards, who was not always the most popular Member of the House, my hon. Friend also showed a rare political skill.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Torbay (Mr. Sanders) on a thoughtful and confident speech. He acknowledged his predecessor, Rupert Allason, who was a colourful character and a man with an independent mind. If the new hon. Member for Torbay applies those qualities, he will serve his new constituency—which he obviously knows very well—with distinction.

The hon. Gentleman's colleague on the Liberal Democrat Benches, the new hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow), replaced a colourful character who was an active Member of the House and he paid tribute to her. The hon. Gentleman is rightly proud of his constituency and of the increased representation of his party in the House. I am sure that he will be a diligent representative of his constituency.

I now come to the speech of the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks. I offer him a warm welcome in his new role. I know that he will enjoy it immensely, particularly the time that he will spend travelling from Richmond to Wales and the time that he will spend travelling around Wales, speaking to that small and dwindling band—the stalwarts of the Conservative party in Wales—and explaining to them why the Opposition, the Conservatives, must now set their face against devolution. He will have to try to explain why, having been rejected quite comprehensively in the polls because of their adherence to the status quo, they must now adhere to the status quo to provide them with their salvation. He will find that a very difficult task.

I should like, however, to pay two tributes to the right hon. Gentleman. He is a great educator and with his predecessor, the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood), he made abundantly clear to us in Wales the unsatisfactory nature of Tory rule from London. My second tribute is that he brings a greater knowledge of Wales to his present job as shadow Secretary of State for Wales than he did when he was appointed Secretary of State.

The right hon. Gentleman made an entertaining speech. It was well practised—and so it should be, as he has made it several times in the past couple of months in various locations and combinations. Sometimes it was with lions, sometimes with Union Jacks, sometimes with Michael Forsyth—and on one memorable occasion it was with all three. The right hon. Gentleman does not seem to have noticed, however, that that speech did not impress the electorate and it does not impress members of this Government. As the Conservative party seeks to come to terms with its failure to represent the interests of the people who voted for it, I should have thought that that party—and the right hon. Gentleman in particular, given his experience in Wales—would take the opportunity for a more reflective look at the big issues that are facing us.

[Mr. Davies]

The second exception is the hon. Member for Upper Bann. I am sorry that I missed much of his speech and that he is not in the Chamber now. Obviously, he spoke with great knowledge of affairs in Northern Ireland and I must place on record the fact that I welcome the support that he gave for devolution and assure him that this Government, like the last, will not flinch in the face of terrorism and that any constitutional change in the north of Ireland will be based firmly on the principle of consent.

The proposals set out in the Queen's Speech reflect the Government's determination to give Britain a modern constitution fit for the 21st century. The themes that we shall pursue are those of democratisation, decentralisation, openness and accountability, and respect and proper protection for human rights. Our agenda is one of sensible, incremental change to meet modern democratic demands.

There are fundamental problems with our present constitutional arrangements—problems which go far to explain public disillusion with our system of government. There is too much power centralised in the hands of too few people, many of them unelected, and too little freedom for local communities to decide their own priorities. Government holds more information than ever before, but the public still have no legal right to share information collected on them by their government.

Parliament itself has probably not been held in lower esteem since the completion of the universal franchise. The passage of deeply unpopular and impractical measures such as the poll tax has raised doubts about both the accountability of Members of Parliament and the effectiveness of their scrutiny in the House.

In Wales, those problems have been exacerbated. There is devolved government, but no democratic process to ensure that government works on behalf of the people. As a result, we have seen the development of the quango state and unaccountable Ministers implementing deeply unpopular and quite inappropriate policies. Fortunately, that system is coming to an end and those policies will be reversed at the earliest opportunity. The early scrapping in Wales of the wasteful, bureaucratic and divisive nursery vouchers system, which was forced on us by an unaccountable Government, is an indication of the determination of the new Government to translate our new policies into early action.

Mr. Bernard Jenkin: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Davies: No, I am afraid that time is tight. I am sorry, as I should have liked to give way to the hon. Gentleman. However, there will be many more occasions for an exchange and I want to reply to the main points made in the debate thus far.

I want to deal mainly with devolution, but I should remind the House how we intend to address some of the wider issues. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has made it clear that in our foreign policy the promotion of human rights world wide will be a priority. As abroad, so at home: we believe that the provision of a code of human rights in United Kingdom law is essential to guarantee an open society and a wider democracy. We are therefore committed to incorporating the main provisions

of the European convention on human rights into United Kingdom law. We shall do so by introducing legislation to make the rights and freedoms guaranteed under the convention part of our own law. That legislation will be an important step in restoring trust in the way in which we are governed, re-balancing the relationship between the citizen and the state and strengthening the commitment to individual rights and freedoms which lies at the heart of our constitution.

We have also made plain the importance that we attach to open and transparent government. We intend to strengthen data protection controls and to publish proposals for a Bill on freedom of information. We shall publish draft Bills for introduction in later Sessions on which we shall undertake public consultation. We shall also seek to ensure more effective scrutiny of those Bills in the House.

With regard to devolution, the Government's proposals for a Scottish Parliament and a Welsh Assembly have caught the public mood. They are in tune with a growing feeling that government has become too distant from people's everyday lives. People understand the scale of the challenge that the new Labour Government face. For 18 years, key public services have been downgraded and demoralised. Reversing that trend will take a new form of government that is more responsive to local needs and better able to promote and encourage local initiative.

In the debate, there have been some inaccurate statements about the Government's devolution proposals, so I shall tell the House what the proposals would mean. In Wales, they would involve placing all the powers currently exercised by the Welsh Office under local democratic control. When established, the Assembly would have the powers that the Welsh Office currently exercises on behalf of the Secretary of State. The Assembly will become responsible for just about all the key public services in Wales, with the exception of social security and law and order. It will have powers to reform the quangos and it will inherit the powers of the Secretary of State for Wales to make secondary legislation.

Those changes will herald an unprecedented transfer of power to the people. Alongside the Scottish Parliament, the Assembly will lead to a radical transformation of our democracy. Given the failures and successes of the last two decades and the decisive rejection of the Conservative party by the people, the continuation of the status quo is no longer an option. The case for change is essentially democratic, but our changes are not only about democracy: by allowing people to have a greater say in fashioning their own lives, asserting their own values and determining their own priorities, I am confident that we shall be able to achieve greater economic prosperity and, by improving our public services, improve our quality of life.

I want the Assembly to be representative of all shades of opinion and it will operate in as open and inclusive a manner as possible. It will serve all the people of Wales and its membership must reflect that. The extent of our commitment to consensual politics is reflected in the additional member system by which people will be elected to the Assembly.

Mr. Livsey *rose*—

Mr. Davies: As the hon. Gentleman knows, I have to finish by a specific time.

I want the Assembly to be a vehicle for establishing a new sense of partnership in Wales. We want to involve those who are within the existing machinery of government as well as people from outside who have a contribution to make. We need to break down the barriers between public and private, management and unions and between north and south. We need to set ourselves a new agenda in which our common goal is to make Wales a better place in which to live. Our Assembly and the Scottish Parliament will be at the heart of this programme of renewal.

The right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks implied that the Government would be authoritarian and repressive in their attitude to dissident Back Benchers. I assure him that that will not be the case. We need no lessons in party management from a member of a former Cabinet which, while the right hon. Gentleman was a member of it, withdrew the Whip from a clutch of its own Members, plunging the Conservative party into chaos and allowing it to degenerate into a disorganised rabble.

Mr. Hague *rose*—

Mr. Davies: I must complete my speech. I make it clear to the right hon. Gentleman that we are entitled to ask for loyalty from party members and from Members of Parliament who were elected on the basis of our manifesto. The party endorsed the policy and the manifesto was endorsed by the people. Everybody, apart from the discredited Conservative party, allows that the status quo is no longer an option. The Conservatives held office for 18 unbroken years, but now their party in the House is scarcely big enough to provide an Opposition.

The former Secretary of State for Wales defends the status quo. Does he not realise how that is seen? He is defending a record that has brought our democracy into disrepute. The Conservative party has put party before country. It is tainted by sleaze and corruption in party and in Government. We have had cash for questions and money for influence, centralisation, denial of diversity, secrecy, cover-up, a quango state, Ministers withholding information, Whips cheating and dissembling, the Scott fiasco and the scandal of the Pergau dam. That is not the way to run a country. This Queen's Speech shows a better way to run this country.

Debate adjourned.—[*Mr. Betts.*]

Debate to be resumed upon Monday next.

Essex Fire Services

Motion made, and Question proposed. That this House do now adjourn.—[*Mr. Betts.*]

2.30 pm

Mr. David Amess (Southend, West): It is my extremely good fortune to have secured my first Adjournment debate for my constituents in Southend, West in the first week of a new Session of a new Parliament. [*Interruption.*] Ignoring the rudeness of certain sedentary interventions on the Labour Benches, after the very poor showing that we have just had, may I congratulate you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, on your appointment to your great office? You are a colleague from Essex and I know how proud your constituents must be of the honour that you have been accorded. Without wishing to show any favouritism, I wish you well throughout the next five years in the job that lies ahead of you.

I raise a serious matter on behalf of my constituents in Southend, West. It concerns the future of Essex fire services and, in particular, the future of Leigh fire station. It is with some regret that, in my brief speech, I will have to criticise the local Liberal party and the local Labour party for their conduct throughout the general election campaign on two issues, which, frankly, if they had only listened to the common sense of the Conservative party, could have been avoided.

On the dispute over pay and conditions for the local fire service, Essex county council is not—until next May—controlled by the Conservatives. It has an unusual arrangement whereby the Liberal and Labour parties have come to a working agreement. That agreement does not seem to work its way through to this Chamber, because the Liberals seem to be sitting with the Conservatives and we clearly have a Labour Government. The Liberals and the Labour party work together on Essex county council, although, during an election, they apparently utter words of hatred to one another. As a result of mismanaging local funds and introducing a disgraceful budget, Essex county council is in a financial shambles. In particular, the Liberals, who led Essex county council, supported by Labour, cut expenditure on the fire service by £1.5 million, whereas the Conservative party would have put £750,000 into the fire service.

May I quickly congratulate the Minister on his appointment? Although he and I have nothing in common politically, it would be churlish not to welcome him to his post. I wish him well in the time that lies ahead of him and make this initial plea: I hope that he will listen carefully to the important matters that I raise and do his best to help my constituents, without necessarily automatically referring to the 18 years of a Conservative Government, but by dealing with the matters that are on his table in his Department. Whereas a general debate tends to be a shouting match, Adjournment debates are constructive and worth while, and I have usually managed to secure the best that I possibly can for my constituents.

In the initial press release from Essex county council on 6 December 1996, the reason given for cuts in funding and the proposed closures of Leigh and Rochford fire stations was that it was trying to ensure that firefighters and appliances were stationed where they were most

[Mr. David Amess]

needed. I attended the public meeting in Southend town hall. I thought that the proposals and the arguments deployed were unconvincing, and the other people present also found them unconvincing. The chief fire officer said:

"This is not a cost-cutting exercise."

On 8 December, the Liberal chairman of the committee said:

"the proposals have nothing to do with the county's budget."

However, throughout the general election campaign his party was hypocritically running around with forms for people to fill in and petitions for them to sign. His party's poisonous literature said daily that the problem was all to do with money and was all the fault of the wicked Conservative Government: it was my fault in particular. It was the same old story.

Nationally, the Liberal party leader began his campaign—

Mr. Bob Russell (Colchester): The Liberal Democrats.

Mr. Amess: Look, the Liberal party has changed its name four times since I have been in Parliament, and I cannot keep up with it. If the hon. Gentleman tells me that it is the Liberal Democrat party, then so be it. Whatever the name of the party, its leader launched the campaign by saying that he did not want a Punch and Judy show, because his party was above the fighting between Conservatives and Labour. Locally, however, the running of its campaign could not have been further from the edict of the leader of the Labour party. Its campaign was all about poison, personalities and misrepresenting the truth. According to the Essex county council press release, the proposals were entirely strategic and not due to lack of finances.

The Liberal Democrat parliamentary candidate led the campaign and said that the proposals were all to do with finance. The now defeated leader of the Liberal Democrat group on Essex county council entirely backed up her spurious and misleading arithmetic. The truth of the matter is that the former Government gave more money to the fire service in Essex: there can be no argument about that. The fire element of the standard spending assessment for Essex was £31.5 million, which was an increase of 4.6 per cent. compared with a national increase of only 4.2 per cent., so Essex did pretty well. Any decision to cut spending was entirely in the hands of local councillors.

Before the general election, the Liberal Democrats and Labour got together and said, "We've got to keep this running as a general election issue, because there are votes in it. We want to spread the poison." That is what they did, because the Conservative proposal was voted down. The poison may have worked elsewhere, but it did not work in the constituency of Southend, West.

The Liberal Democrats put out the press release to distract attention from what they had actually done, because the cuts were their fault. Whether it be education, highways or fire services, they bungled the management. The local brigade is now balloting its members: the ballot papers went out on Monday and must be returned by the 22nd. I have seen the proposals. As ballot papers are still being returned, I do not wish to influence anyone who

has not yet voted, but I am cautiously optimistic that the agreement will be accepted by the fire brigade. Nevertheless, it is to the shame of certain local politicians that those firemen were put in a completely invidious position. I know only too well that the last thing the firemen wanted to do was to go on strike. Moreover, there would have been no need for a strike if the Conservatives had been listened to.

I am sure that the Minister will have other issues in future fire service funding to which he will have to direct his attention. Nevertheless, I should like to quote from a document entitled "In the Line of Fire: Value for Money in the Fire Service" and the arguments deployed by the hon. Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay) just before the general election. As the document deals with important matters, with which I hope the Minister will deal, I shall repeat some of those arguments. It states:

"The current method of assessing risk, although simple and clear, has many disadvantages. When the approach was first developed in the 1930s and 1940s it was probably ahead of its time, but since then more sophisticated risk assessment techniques have been developed."

I did not find any of those matters dealt with in our meeting at Southend civic centre.

The document continues:

"Moreover, the framework determines risk by consideration of property type and density".

However, all those factors have changed. The framework "takes no account of the socio-demographic make-up of the population",

which has certainly changed in Southend, West. The document continues:

"Additionally, they are viewed by some senior fire officers as inappropriate. It has been argued, for example, that the recommended minimum response for A risk areas (e.g. commercial districts) is excessive, whereas the minimum response for some C risk areas (e.g. densely populated, inner-city areas) is insufficient."

Those are serious matters, and they must be dealt with quickly.

The document continues:

"The formula is based on a basket of key data about each fire authority (population, ward-weighted density, the amount of A risk territory and the number of fires and false alarms). Currently, a majority of English county councils spends in excess of their SSAs... The SSA formula does not accurately reflect the cost for all authorities of providing fire cover to meet the national standards: for example, it can hardly be a coincidence that all rural counties deem it necessary to exceed their SSAs, some by over 40 per cent...."

The failure of the current SSA formula to reflect local needs and local costs equitably is not the only shortcoming of the current formula."

I know that firemen feel very strongly that SSAs do not seem to take into account any funding for special services, and I should specifically mention the fundamentally important services that they provide in dealing with road traffic accidents in the Leigh area of Essex. If the Minister does not have time in this debate to deal with those matters, I ask him to do so after it.

Some months ago, other Essex Members and I were invited by officers of Essex county council to a presentation at Southend civic centre on the closure of Leigh fire station. I rest my case on the basis of that presentation. One of the officers, who had responsibility for planning, had originally said that Essex county council

had met and decided that future building would occur in the middle of the county. However, as everyone wanted to live in either Basildon or Canvey Island, the council subsequently decided that future building would occur in those areas—a statement which I questioned. The House can therefore imagine my shock when I learned at the presentation that none of those matters had been taken into account.

I should mention some crucial facts about Leigh fire station. We have had it for more than 100 years, during which time the nature of the area has changed dramatically. The area has an aging population. Indeed, according to Age Concern, Southend, West is 31st out of the 659 constituencies in that respect. It contains a huge number of homes with elderly people. In addition, Southend general hospital has taken over all the services formerly provided by Rochford hospital, making it a large hospital in terms of the amount of work it does, although not in terms of its site when compared to that at Basildon. However, it is difficult to gain access to the Southend hospital, which is a huge risk in itself.

The presentation also failed to cover other factors. I now live in Westcliff where, over the years, there has been an increase in the number of houses in multiple occupation. I was surprised that some of the houses that I saw during the election campaign had been granted licences. I was a member of the Standing Committee that debated the 1996 Housing Bill which dealt specifically with the licensing of houses in multiple occupation. The increase in the number of such properties is an important factor in assessing the viability of Leigh fire station.

Southend also has an airport; there have long been arguments about air traffic movement, which is a matter of dispute between Southend and Rochford councils. The A13 and the A127 also run through the area. I represented Basildon for 14 years and think it inappropriate to place on Hadleigh, Canvey Island or Basildon all the extra work that will undoubtedly arise from the closure of Leigh fire station.

There are many issues that I do not have time to raise, but the bottom line is that the response time laid down for the service by the regulations—regulations of which the Minister is no doubt only too well aware—cannot be delivered.

I now sit on the Opposition Benches, but that does not mean that I intend to remain silent on this or any other matter. The Conservatives did very well in the local elections. Southend will have a unitary authority next year and the Conservatives will certainly be the largest group, followed by the Liberals, who are now down to 14 councillors and Labour, down to seven. On Essex county council, the Conservatives are again easily the largest group with 44 councillors, while the Liberals are down to 20 and Labour down to 33.

Next April, Thurrock and Southend are to be removed from Essex county council's area and the council will be Conservative controlled. I pay tribute to Councillors Paul White and David Westacott, who gave me an undertaking that they would carefully examine all the matters that I have raised. I have asked them to ensure that Leigh fire station is kept open. I hope that Labour and Liberal Democrat Members of Parliament will also try to use their influence with county and district councillors.

I congratulate the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, the hon. Member for Knowsley, North and Sefton, East (Mr. Howarth), on his appointment.

I know that he cannot put right in just a few days all the wrongs that I perceived during the election campaign, but I ask him to consider the future fire service SSA and, above all, to do all that he can to secure the future of Leigh fire station.

2.48 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. George Howarth): I congratulate you on your elevation, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I have served under you in Committee and I know that you will be firm and fair in the Chair, which is as much as we can expect.

I also congratulate the hon. Member for Southend, West (Mr. Amess) on initiating the debate. I thank him for his kind remarks about my new post. I confirm that we have little in common politically, but I am sure that, over the months, we shall find that we have more in common, particularly on his concerns about the fire service in Essex.

The hon. Gentleman understandably concentrated on events leading up to the recent industrial action. I shall respond to those points, but it is important to make some more general comments, as this is the first time that the Government have had an opportunity to comment on the fire service.

We have good reason to be proud of the performance of the fire service in this country. The courage of our firefighters and other qualities of the service were recognised in the 1995 Audit Commission report, "In the Line of Fire", which the hon. Gentleman referred to. Hon. Members who are present should know that we want to take that important document seriously.

I congratulate my hon. Friends the Members for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay), for Basildon (Ms Smith), who had a wonderful victory in the election, and for Poplar and Canning Town (Mr. Fitzpatrick), who brings a great deal of expertise on the fire service to the House. I should point out that my hon. Friends the Members for Thurrock and for Basildon had some influence on the events that led up to what we hope will be a settlement of the dispute. I congratulate them on their constructive involvement.

We have every reason to be proud of our fire service. The Audit Commission highlighted four important achievements: its record in responding to incidents; its high levels of skill and professionalism; the able managers and the courageous and committed front-line staff; and the great esteem in which the service is held by the general public and individuals who have needed its assistance. The Government whole-heartedly endorse the Audit Commission's comments.

In March this year, the commission further reported on performance indicators for local authorities for 1995-96. It said that

"the fire service is one of the most consistently high-performing services in local government. Most brigades achieved national standards for at least nine of the ten fire calls during all three years from 1993-94 to 1995-96, with the poorest performances significantly improving over this period. These improvements were achieved with increases in spending no higher than the levels of inflation."

We are therefore debating a service which has a proven record of efficiency and effectiveness. Essex is now one of the high-performing brigades. In 1995-96, it met its recommended response times to fire calls on 95.8 per cent. of occasions.

[Mr. George Howarth]

A few words about the duties of fire authorities are also appropriate. The statutory responsibility for providing fire services rests with the local fire authority, which is responsible for securing the services for its area, for the efficient training of members of the fire brigade, for efficient arrangements for dealing with calls for fire brigade assistance in the case of fire and for summoning members of the brigade. The fire authority sets the budget within which the brigades work and is responsible for ensuring that it is set at a level sufficient for those responsibilities to be discharged.

However, fire authorities have to set the budget within the overall limits set by central Government. To discharge their statutory obligations in 1996-97, fire authorities are expected to have to spend £117 million more than the fire service share of total standard spending determined by the previous Government. As I made clear in a debate in the House on the fire service on 8 May last year, the difficulties that the fire authority in Essex was experiencing even then stemmed from the manner in which the previous Administration had dealt with local government and fire service financing not only in the past two or three years but since the late-1970s and early-1980s.

The fire service has done particularly well to maintain levels of performance in the light of constraints on its funding. Problems that this Government have inherited, however, cannot be resolved overnight. The hon. Gentleman should not seek to minimise the difficulties that face Essex county council in setting the budget for its local authority services for 1997-98 or to disguise the true origin of those difficulties.

The increase in Essex's fire standard spending assessment for 1997-98 of £1.6 million, which is a 4.7 per cent. increase—the hon. Gentleman said that it was a 4.6 per cent. increase, but I will not quibble—has to be seen in the context of the budget for the county as a whole, which was capped at 2 per cent. and from which the authority had to meet all the demands on education, personal social services and many other services. That led to the industrial action.

As the House will be aware, the initial budget proposals of the council led the Fire Brigades Union to ballot for industrial action. The ballot went ahead and the strike action was supported by more than half the firefighters in the county. Seven strikes were called between 19 April and 7 May. Four further dates were notified, but have now been called off pending a ballot on the proposed settlement. Further ballots were held in Cambridgeshire and London, but they are not relevant to this debate.

Not all the Essex fire stations were affected, as 22 of the 33 retained fire stations continued to provide a normal level of service. At the request of the fire authority, the military assisted. I pay tribute to the armed forces for the assistance they provided, as I do to the officers of the brigade for co-ordinating the work that had to be carried out to keep the service running. It is fortunate that there were no major fires while the industrial action was taking place and it was certainly an unwelcome additional commitment for the military, which they discharged with their customary braveness and professionalism.

In any industrial action there are, of course, costs. When the union first chose to strike, my right hon. Friend the Member for Blackburn (Mr. Straw) urged arbitration. Although initial negotiations between the council and the union were unsuccessful, the message from the House needs to be that industrial action can only ever be justified as a weapon of the very last resort, especially in these circumstances. The military cannot provide the necessary level of fire cover or, in every case, the skill required. It is estimated that the additional cost initially will amount to about £300,000. That cost will be borne by the council tax payers in Essex.

The hon. Gentleman will, no doubt, be aware that existing legislation provides safeguards; that is of direct relevance to the proposals from the fire service. Any proposals must have the express consent of my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary. He will give approval only if he is satisfied that the authority has consulted properly and that it can reduce the number of fire stations, fire appliances and firefighting posts without there being an undue effect. He will, of course, take account of any comments made by the Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Fire Services on the necessary levels of fire cover, which are set nationally.

We recognise the importance of those responsibilities and if further proposals come forward, we shall examine them with great care and responsibility. We have a great commitment to maintaining the integrity and efficiency of fire services in Essex and elsewhere.

There is still work to be done. I have already referred to the Audit Commission report. In 1995, the commission recommended that there should be another national review of levels of fire cover. The research into those conclusions is going ahead and I hope that, in due course, we shall have a report available for discussion. The section 19 safeguard to which I have referred is already in place and if there are any future proposals regarding Leigh fire station, any appliances or any jobs, it will come into play.

I am sure that the House will join me in hoping that the present dispute will now be brought to a speedy and amicable conclusion, and that the firefighters will accept the settlement that their union has recommended to them.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at one minute to Three o'clock.

House of Commons

Monday 19 May 1997

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Member Sworn

The following Member took and subscribed the Oath required by Law: Gordon McMaster, esquire, Paisley, South

Oral Answers to Questions

NATIONAL HERITAGE

National Lottery

1. **Mr. Ian Bruce:** To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what plans he has to reduce the level of national lottery funds allocated to the present good causes.

[360]

The Secretary of State for National Heritage (Mr. Chris Smith): I am delighted to respond to the hon. Gentleman's question as the first Labour Cabinet Minister to answer a departmental question in this House in 18 years.

The national lottery is the people's lottery, it is the people's money and the new Government believe that we should address the people's priorities. That is why our proposals in the Queen's Speech will bring the benefits of the lottery to more people in more imaginative ways. The financial success of the lottery, particularly the introduction of the midweek draw, means that we can implement our plans without any significant effect on the existing good causes.

Mr. Bruce: I welcome the right hon. Gentleman and his team to the Front Bench. In particular, I warmly welcome the Minister for Sport, who will encourage Back Benchers to feel that perhaps we can all make it. Perhaps the Minister will take time to look back at the honourable record of the previous Minister for Sport, who for many years wanted a national lottery, even when the Labour party was against it, and who on every occasion—

Madam Speaker: Order. I think that we ought to get off to a good start for the first Question Time. Therefore, I would like a question now, please.

Mr. Bruce: The previous Minister for Sport said that that there should be no replacement of Government spending with lottery spending. Will the present Minister for Sport have to say "We was robbed" on behalf of the good causes, which may lose up to £1 billion?

Mr. Smith: First, many hon. Members from all parties have long supported the principle of a national lottery.

Secondly, as a Government we hold fast to the principle of additionality—that money from the lottery should not replace the essential projects which are rightly funded by the Exchequer. The lottery is there to add value to projects which would not otherwise be possible. That is precisely what our proposals for using some of the midweek lottery proceeds are all about.

Mr. Pike: I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his appointment as Secretary of State and on being the first Labour Cabinet Minister to answer questions at the Dispatch Box for so many years. I hope that he will continue to do so for as many years as we were in opposition. Does he realise that one thing that we could do to help more good causes to benefit from the lottery is to ensure that Camelot does not make excessive profits, far greater than were originally intended? Should not more money go to the good causes that we all want the lottery to support?

Mr. Smith: I thank my hon. Friend for his kind words and his welcome. We shall be looking to create a "not for profit" operation of the lottery once the present contract for its operation comes to an end in 2001.

Mrs. Virginia Bottomley: I, too, congratulate the right hon. Gentleman and his colleagues on their appointments. The past five years have seen unprecedented investment in arts, sports and heritage and I commend to him the Department, the excellent officials who work there and the many independent bodies with which he will need to co-operate. Let there be no doubt, however, that the midweek draw was part of the original licence and the proceeds of that draw are part of the anticipated return on which the arts, sports and heritage are depending. If the right hon. Gentleman now rolls over to the Treasury and allows it to fund mainstream public spending from the lottery, he will have thrown away the greatest opportunity we have ever known to invest in sports, arts, heritage and the caring charities.

Mr. Smith: I thank the right hon. Lady for her welcome and I concur entirely with the first part of her remarks about the extremely fine servants who serve us at the Department. However, the second part of her remarks is based on a complete misunderstanding. There is no question of our replacing mainstream Exchequer funding with proceeds from the lottery. Through our proposals for the use of some of the midweek lottery proceeds, we want to fund projects related to health and education which would not otherwise be possible. I had hoped that the right hon. Lady would give a rather warmer welcome to the idea of having healthy living centres in the high streets of this country and after-school clubs for the school children of this country, which are some of the things that we want to fund with lottery money.

Motor Racing

2. **Mr. Key:** To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage when he will meet representatives of British motor racing to discuss funding of that sport. [361]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for National Heritage (Mr. Tony Banks): First, I acknowledge that a previous, very distinguished sports

Minister is asking this question. I intend to meet representatives of many sports in the coming months and they will, of course, include representatives of motor racing.

Mr. Key: May I be the first to congratulate the Minister on his new appointment? It is an early example of job creation in the Labour Government—two people did the job before and four people are doing it now, so we can expect a great deal. In view of the Government's decision today to abolish tobacco sponsorship as well as advertising, will the hon. Gentleman talk to the motor racing and motor sports industry, which employs more than 50,000 people? Will there be time and assistance for a transitional period and, if so, how much? Will the ban also include the broadcasting by television in this country of events overseas where tobacco bans do not apply?

Mr. Banks: We need the extra Minister here to answer the many supplementaries that the hon. Gentleman has put. Motor racing in this country relies to a degree on sponsorship from the tobacco industry. However, I have been supplied with a list of all the other sponsors of motor racing and there are clearly adequate substitutes. One does not want to see the sport suffer as this country benefits enormously from the technology, skills and other spin-offs from the motor racing industry. However, there is a manifesto undertaking. It is clear that people voted overwhelmingly for my party with that manifesto undertaking and we intend to implement it. What transitional period we can get into place is a matter for negotiation, but nothing can stand in the way of our implementing that manifesto undertaking.

National Lottery

3. **Mrs. Organ:** To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what plans he has to make the national lottery more relevant to ordinary people. [362]

Mr. Chris Smith: Unlike the previous Government, we have listened to what the people have to say about the lottery. The Bill to reform the lottery will ensure that some of the proceeds of the lottery go to health and education-related projects and are used to nurture young talent in the arts and sciences. I shall be reviewing the way in which the existing good causes benefit to see that they, too, are increasingly relevant to the widest possible range of people.

Mrs. Organ: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his reply, but what assurances can he give the people of the Forest of Dean that they will receive an equal and fair share of lottery funding, as should other rural areas? Can he assure the people of the Forest of Dean that the distribution system for lottery funds will be reformed so that it does not become metrocentric, as it did under the previous Government?

Mr. Smith: I start by welcoming my hon. Friend to the House and saying how pleased we are to see her here. I am glad that my campaigning visit during the general election campaign was such a success.

I aim to ensure that all parts of the country benefit fully and fairly from the lottery. Early this summer, we shall issue a White Paper for consultation in preparation for the

National Lottery (Amendment) Bill, which will be introduced later this year. In the White Paper, we shall address precisely such issues.

Mr. Alan Clark: As the Secretary of State seems to have a completely open mind about where lottery funds are directed, will he apply his mind to the issue of the British Olympic pistol shooting team, which appears likely to be wiped off the map by his Government's intemperate legislation?

Mr. Smith: I am sure that the right hon. Gentleman will wish to make those points when legislation is rightly introduced to ban handguns. However, I can say to him that we have one very firm purpose in mind—to ensure that the proceeds of the national lottery are spent on the things that the people of this country want them to be spent on. That is why we came up with proposals during the general election campaign. It may surprise Opposition Members to know that the present Government—exceptionally—believe in fulfilling the commitments that we made during the general election campaign.

Mr. Maxton: I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his appointment to what I consider to be the most interesting and one of the most important jobs in Government. May I suggest three quick ways in which he might improve the lottery?

First, will my right hon. Friend ensure that sports councils and arts councils can allocate money especially to areas of multiple deprivation? At present, the process of allocating funds is entirely bid led. Secondly, will my right hon. Friend ensure that a larger part of the total amount given to those projects is distributed in areas of multiple deprivation?

Mr. Fabricant: Thirdly?

Mr. Maxton: Thirdly—I have forgotten.

Mr. Smith: I thank my hon. Friend for his question; if he remembers the third question in due course, I shall be happy to discuss it with him afterwards.

The answer to the first question is yes: one aspect of the lottery that bothers me is the fact that it is entirely application driven, which is one reason for the apparent misdistribution of lottery funds regionally across the country.

The answer to the second question is that I believe very strongly indeed that funds from the lottery must benefit those areas of deprivation that can most benefit from them.

Mr. Dafis: In Wales, there is a fair amount of praise for the work done by the National Lottery Charities Board and by the system of distribution of funding for sports and the arts, but there is a fair amount of dissatisfaction regarding the work of the heritage fund and the Millennium Commission, and that dissatisfaction probably has something to do with the fact that there is no specific Welsh organisational structure with reference to those. Will the right hon. Gentleman discuss with the

Secretary of State for Wales how that situation might be rectified, and specifically what that might have to do with the establishment of a Welsh Assembly or Parliament?

Mr. Smith: I certainly wish to discuss with my right hon. Friend all matters relating to the deployment of lottery funds in Wales—especially, of course, in relation to the establishment of a Welsh Assembly.

One of the things that please me most about what the lottery boards are doing is the work of the National Lottery Charities Board, especially in making small-scale grants at neighbourhood and community level to pensioner groups, tenants and residents associations, and so on, throughout the country, including Wales.

Millennium Commissioners

5. Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what plans he has to increase the number of Millennium Commissioners. [364]

Mr. Chris Smith: The National Lottery etc. Act 1993 provides that there shall be nine members of the Millennium Commission, appointed by Her Majesty the Queen on the advice of the Prime Minister. There are no plans to increase the number of commissioners.

Mr. Vaz: May I add my congratulations to the Secretary of State on his outstanding start? Does he agree that it is essential that the Millennium Commission be representative of the community? As constituted, it is not representative. I tried for four months to have a meeting with my right hon. Friend's predecessor to discuss these very issues, but she was not able to find time to see me and community representatives at such a meeting.

Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is important to look again at the membership of the commission? It would be quite easy to introduce a small Act of Parliament to change the composition of the commission to allow for more commissioners who are representative and to deal with the backlog of assessments.

Mr. Smith: I should be only too delighted—unlike my predecessor, perhaps—to meet my hon. Friend to discuss these matters. Under the legislation, six of the nine members of the Millennium Commission are in place until 31 December 2000. Three members of the commission change with the change of Government and I am delighted to say that I am taking up the post of chairman. Of course, the decisions that the commission takes must reflect the needs of the community as a whole, including all parts of the community—all races, all ages, both genders and all regions of the country. Those are firm principles which must guide the considerations of the commissioners.

National Lottery

6. Mr. Skinner: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what steps he is taking to ensure a fairer distribution of lottery proceeds to regions. [365]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for National Heritage (Mr. Mark Fisher): It is clear that some areas of the country have benefited a great deal more from the lottery than others. Our policy is based on

the premise that the lottery must benefit, and must be seen to benefit, everyone, wherever they live. We shall therefore be looking at this as part of our overall review of lottery distribution and considering what changes can be made as a result.

Mr. Skinner: I hope that the review will not be dragged out. We have been the party of protest for 18 years and now we are the party of power. Now that we are in government, let us transform all our wonderful ideas from our time in opposition and bring about some changes.

Is my hon. Friend aware that the Bolsover area—a string of pit villages with no jobs left—has fared badly in respect of the lottery? We have no major towns or cities, no opera houses and none of the fancy areas that have been getting money hand over fist. In future, let us make sure of a fair redistribution to those who contribute to the lottery in those mining villages, so as to restore some balance.

Mr. Fisher: My hon. Friend is quite right: the east midlands has received only 4 per cent. of awards and grants, and has benefited the least in per capita terms—£29 per head—of any part of the country, so my hon. Friend's grievance is well put. I should point out, however, that there have been 10 awards worth £400,000 in Bolsover and brass bands—a subject dear to my hon. Friend's heart—have benefited by more than £3 million so far. Nevertheless, my hon. Friend is right to say that areas such as the east midlands have fared badly. We were shocked to find that the former Government gave no leadership and offered no strategy on this, and we are determined to see that the lottery boards give priority to a better geographical distribution and to all types and ranges of project.

Mr. Butterfill: When considering how to allocate money to the arts, will the hon. Gentleman bear in mind the fact that such money should not go only to the major cities, even though many of them may be represented by his party, but should also benefit towns and villages that might not otherwise have a chance to see the arts? The hon. Gentleman will appreciate that I am thinking of touring companies such as the Bournemouth symphony orchestra and the Bournemouth symphonietta which tour the country bringing their contribution to the arts to a much wider public.

Mr. Fisher: It is strange to find the hon. Gentleman agreeing with my hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Mr. Skinner) that small villages in rural areas should benefit, but I agree with both of them: it is right that rural areas and small towns and cities should benefit as well. That is why our review will look at geographic distribution and ensure that not only London and large metropolitan areas benefit from the lottery.

Televised Sport

7. Mrs. Gordon: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what plans he has to increase the number of listed sporting events on television. [366]

Mr. Fisher: As promised in our manifesto, the Government will carry out a review of the listed events.

Mrs. Gordon: Does my hon. Friend agree with the popular demand from my constituents in Romford that

everyone is entitled to watch all the major fixtures that feature the national team, including all the world cup qualifiers, and that the right to see the world cup finals free to air should mean exactly that—the right to see every match and not just the last few fixtures?

Mr. Fisher: I congratulate my hon. Friend on her successful election campaign and welcome her to this place. What she says about the world cup matches is well taken; that is why they are included in the listed events. My hon. Friend speaks for many people in wishing to see a wider range of key events listed and protected from privileged viewing. We shall therefore conduct an urgent review, starting this week, in which we shall consult sports bodies, broadcasters and the public to ensure that the greatest number of people can see the events that they want to see.

Mr. Hawkins: Will the urgent new review include an investigation into the secret deal between the Prime Minister and Rupert Murdoch on Cayman Island? In the light of reports over the weekend that Murdoch now intends to do further deals for pay per view with cable television, is it not clear that the only way in which sport will be seen by the majority of people is if the link is broken between the Prime Minister and Rupert Murdoch?

Mr. Fisher: The hon. Gentleman makes a puerile and ridiculous point. The review is about which sporting events should be available to everybody, regardless of whether they have satellite or any other broadcasting facility. That is the basis on which we have been elected—to ensure that the good things in this country are available to everyone, unlike the situation under the previous Government. Our review will ensure that good sporting events are available in that way.

National Lottery

8. **Mr. Rendel:** To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what plans he has to alter the way in which funds raised by the national lottery are used. [367]

Mr. Chris Smith: The Government's plans will widen access to the benefits of the lottery by extending the range of initiatives that can receive lottery funding. The creation of a national endowment for science and the arts, in particular, is an imaginative proposal for investment in youth, in talent and in the future.

Mr. Rendel: May I add the congratulations of Liberal Democrat Members to the Secretary of State and his team on their appointment? Does the Secretary of State agree that his response makes the bid for the restoration of Shaw House school even more important, as it is not only probably the second most important historic building in Berkshire but it comes within the scope of his new funds for matters on the periphery of the educational establishment?

Mr. Smith: The hon. Gentleman will know that it is not up to me to make a decision on that application, but I have no doubt whatever that he will vigorously promote the interests of his constituents in that regard. However, our proposal for the use of lottery money for the national endowment for science and the arts and for education and

health-related projects—which will come forward in legislation later this year—will do an enormous amount to put money into worthwhile initiatives, including after-school clubs, the national endowment, healthy living centres and information technology training for teachers. Those projects are crying out to be undertaken, but at the moment there is no Exchequer funding to do so. That is valuable work done by the people's lottery in accordance with the people's priorities, and I hope that Liberal Democrat Members will welcome the proposals when they are presented in legislation.

Mr. Cohen: I offer my congratulations and commiserations to my right hon. Friend—congratulations on his appointment, and commiserations because it presumably means that he will have to sit through the Eurovision song contest next year. On the use of lottery funds, will he specifically allow local authority schools and nurseries to bid for money for projects dear to their hearts?

Mr. Smith: On my hon. Friend's first point, if we have such a landslide victory again in the Eurovision song contest it will be a pleasure to sit through it. On his second point, there is a wide range of projects coming from all sources, including those closely related to schools and education, to which we shall want lottery money to be allocated. Precisely to assist that process, we intend to reform the lottery by means of the amendment Bill later this year.

Mr. Fabricant: It may be the people's lottery, but will not the people will be rather confused since the right hon. Gentleman said today that the principle of additionality would be adhered to but he also said that plans such as those for the training of teachers in information technology would be funded out of the national lottery? The two do not agree.

Mr. Smith: I am afraid that the hon. Gentleman is mistaken. The two do agree. We intend to hold to the proposal that we announced during the election campaign because we intend to hold to everything that we said during the election campaign—unlike a certain other party elected five years ago. The proposal in relation to IT training for teachers is to ensure, as a one-off exercise, that existing teachers can develop the skills in teaching and using information technology that many of them do not currently have. I am surprised that the hon. Gentleman is not interested in ensuring that the school pupils of this country can learn properly from their teachers about the use of new technology.

National Museums Week

9. **Mr. Cranston:** To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what steps he is taking to promote access to museums during national museums week. [368]

Mr. Fisher: I welcome the contribution that museums week makes to encouraging people to visit museums. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State wrote to all hon. Members encouraging them to visit museums in their constituencies during museums week this week and our Department has contributed towards the cost of the event.

Mr. Cranston: Will the Minister outline his policies on the educational role of local museums, given that many

have adopted an innovative policy in that regard? Some local museums, such as the Dudley museum and the Black Country museum in my constituency, have also performed a valuable function in terms of cultural policy and even economic regeneration.

Mr. Fisher: I welcome my hon. Friend and congratulate him on his excellent election result. I agree with him that museums have a key role to play in education, which is why we place particular emphasis on their work with schools. Museums are our history in tangible form. As my hon. Friend points out, excellent museums such as the Black Country museum allow his constituents to understand our industrial past, which is a vital part of understanding where we come from as a people and respecting our history. That is why we believe that museums week is an extremely important innovation. We pay tribute to that, and especially to the leadership of Mr. Loyd Grossman, the chairman of the museums week campaign.

Mr. Fearn: Has the issue of access for the disabled been examined thoroughly during national museums week? Many of our museums are still not accessible to the disabled. Also, the Minister mentioned the education system, but the youth service seems to be the Cinderella of the museums service. Could young people be invited to visit museums during national museums week?

Mr. Fisher: I welcome the hon. Gentleman back; when he was a Member of Parliament before, he played an important part in arts and cultural debates. I was interested in his reference to Cinderella, because he is a well-known pantomime Dame—so his contribution to our debates will be even more enjoyable.

I agree that not only many museums but theatres, libraries and other key cultural elements in our communities remain inaccessible to people. We will not tolerate that situation, and the hon. Gentleman may be reassured in that regard by the fact that our departmental team comprises my hon. Friend the Member for Coatbridge and Chryston (Mr. Clarke), who has laboured hard in the House promoting the interests of the disabled. I think that all hon. Members would agree that we must make our cultural life much more accessible to every person, regardless of ability or disability.

United Kingdom Football Team

10. **Mr. Rhodri Morgan:** To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what consultations he has had with Mark Hughes concerning proposals for a single United Kingdom-wide representative Association Football team.

[370]

Mr. Banks: I had a couple of conversations with Mark Hughes over the weekend, but, in view of the circumstances, I cannot remember what we talked about. My reference to a United Kingdom football team was well described as "pub talk". Madam Speaker, I think that you and the House will understand that there have been some glitches in my transition from saloon bar sage to world statesman, but I shall try. I remind my hon. Friend that, although many people said, "What a load of rubbish," every single journalist then suggested a United Kingdom team. It was just an idea to kick around—or even out.

Mr. Morgan: May I bracket my congratulations to the Minister for Sport with congratulations to Chelsea and to

Mark Hughes on their magnificent cup final victory on Saturday? What on earth was the Minister doing upsetting Chelsea's star Welsh centre forward just three days before the cup final?

I know that the Prime Minister said in the Queen's Speech debate that we would be a one nation Government, but I thought that the Minister's suggestion an hour or two later that the United Kingdom should have a one nation soccer team was carrying total sycophancy rather too far. Will the Minister accept also that in the sport of cricket, where we play as one country, the decline has been even greater than in soccer? I suggest that his idea was not just half-baked; it was not even quarter-sauteed.

Mr. Banks: That was a question in two halves, Madam Speaker. *[Interruption.]* Indeed, it is right to point that out. Mark Hughes played an extravagantly useful part in Chelsea's cup success. All I can say is that Labour delivers on its promises: I became Sports Minister and Chelsea won the cup in the same week.

I think that my hon. Friend should lighten up a little on this point. There is no great problem in discussing such matters in an open and general fashion—although perhaps I shall have to think more carefully in future about making constructive suggestions that people may take very seriously.

I conclude by extending congratulations on behalf of the whole Department to Barry Town on becoming the successful Welsh team to compete in next year's European champions league. Let us hope that they win it.

Mr. Robathan: Saloon bar sage or world statesman, I add my congratulations to those extended to the hon. Gentleman on his new appointment. I am sure that he would agree that, whether it be a United Kingdom team or individual nation teams, we all want them to be successful. Sporting success depends on how sport is taught to the young. Therefore, will the Minister give his whole-hearted support to encouraging competitive sport in schools?

Mr. Banks: One of the first things we must do is stop the sale of school playing fields which the Conservative Government not only encouraged, but required, of education authorities. We have now stopped those sales, and we shall examine the matter carefully. The hon. Gentleman is right: unless we encourage sport in our schools, we cannot look forward to the success of our athletes and sports men and women later in life. I assure the hon. Gentleman that encouraging sport in schools will be a priority of this Department.

National Lottery

11. **Mrs. Helen Jackson:** To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what new areas of community activity he plans to allow to qualify for lottery grant aid.

[371]

The Minister for Film and Tourism (Mr. Tom Clarke): Our people's money proposals will allow lottery funds to make a greater impact than ever before on communities throughout the country. The first priorities will be establishing after-school clubs to provide homework centres and extra-curricular opportunities in

the arts and culture; establishing a national network of one-stop healthy living centres promoting health and fitness; and training teachers in the information technology skills that they need in the information age.

Mrs. Jackson: I welcome the swift action of my hon. Friends on the Government Front Bench in announcing the improvement and widening of the lottery guidelines. Will my hon. Friend take on board the suggestions in my constituency? High Green school was adapted for disability, but, tragically, closed under the cuts of the former Administration. However, it is hoped that it will be restored and that its facilities will not only be made available for disabled teaching but opened up to sports development and activities, with the full backing of the community. Will my hon. Friend confirm that centres offering such community and educational use will be eligible for lottery funds in the future?

Mr. Clarke: My hon. Friend has, as always, made a very valid point. She put her finger on precisely the activity that we support in funding.

On my hon. Friend's specific point, she will, of course, know that people who wish to apply for lottery funding should apply to the National Lottery Charities Board, which will consider it in the light of its published criteria. I am delighted that my hon. Friend has taken on board the objectives of the people's lottery. I am pretty sure that people, not only in Sheffield but throughout Britain, will recognise and endorse her priorities.

Mrs. Virginia Bottomley: Community and voluntary groups rightly value the opportunities provided by the lottery, but is the Minister also aware that such groups greatly benefited from the active sponsorship of the Department of National Heritage? What possible justification is there for returning community and voluntary organisations to the Home Office? What consultation took place? What are the next responsibilities that the hon. Gentleman expects to lose? Do we expect that, each time the Department loses further responsibilities, extra Ministers will be appointed?

Perhaps the Minister will be aware that assisting on public bodies is the community activity in which many serve. Now that the chairman of the UK Sports Council has left, thanks to the injudicious remarks of the Minister for Sport, will the Minister deny today's reports that the chairman of the BBC, appointed under Nolan procedures, has been told that speaking against Government policy is to be considered as grounds for dismissal?

Mr. Clarke: I had not thought that the Tory leadership contest would intrude on questions to the Department of National Heritage. The former Minister at the Home Office deserves greater support from the right hon. Lady than she seems to have had this afternoon.

With regard to the responsibilities of individual Departments, I want to pay the same tribute that voluntary organisations throughout the country paid to my hon. Friend—[*Interruption.*] Is this a party that believes in law and order—what is left of it?

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff, South and Penarth (Mr. Michael) for the wonderful work that he has done with voluntary organisations. I am sure that that will continue in his new post.

I remind the right hon. Lady that this is a people's lottery involving people's money. The people took their decision on 1 May and she would be wise to accept it.

World Cup 2006

12. Mr. Pound: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what progress is being made to secure the staging of the 2006 world cup in England. [372]

Mr. Banks: May I congratulate my hon. Friend on winning Ealing, North and so freeing the House from the grip of the Ealing One? The Government fully support the Football Association's bid for the 2006 world cup. I have already had positive discussions with the FA, and we are assisting it as much as we can.

Mr. Pound: I thank my hon. Friend for that reply. I add my congratulations on his team's success on Saturday and note that it was a comparatively rare success for the Blues. I ask my hon. Friend to redouble his efforts to secure the world cup in 2006. As I think everyone in the House knows, the United Kingdom wins the world cup only when under a Labour Government.

Mr. Banks: I thank my hon. Friend. I was quite happy at Wembley to be singing about keeping the blue flag flying—but, I hasten to add, not politically. It is essential that we get the 2006 world cup. It is in our manifesto. We cannot compel that to happen, but we have given an undertaking that we shall do whatever is necessary to get the world cup for 2006. The country is looking at a sports-orientated Government, starting from No. 10 Downing street and working right the way through to my humble level.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Immigration Appeals

27. Mr. Vaz: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what proposals he has to clear the backlog of cases before the Immigration Appeal Tribunal. [391]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (Mr. Geoffrey Hoon): The new Government are committed in their manifesto to ensuring that decisions in these cases are swift and fair. I agree with my hon. Friend that the backlog is unacceptably large. As a result, about 40 more part-time adjudicators will be recruited over the summer. Our plans to abolish the primary purpose rule should have a substantial effect.

Mr. Vaz: I congratulate my hon. Friend on his appointment. I am certain that he will do an excellent job. As he has said, he has inherited an intolerable situation from the previous Government. My hon. Friend must be aware that the delay in obtaining IAT dates causes enormous distress and hardship to the thousands of applicants who are awaiting their hearing dates, especially those who have made pre-entry applications and are waiting abroad. Will my hon. Friend please consider the representations made by various organisations that efforts should be made to ease the backlog? The appointment of

more adjudicators will help, but perhaps my hon. Friend will consider the possibility of a fast-track system for cases that involve children.

Mr. Hoon: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his good wishes. I repeat: the Government are determined to reduce the level of the backlog. We recognise that it is imperative that we deal with it before dealing with new cases that are coming through the system. I have already had a preliminary meeting with Home Office colleagues to discuss the matter. My hon. Friend will know that a new listing system has been piloted successfully at a new hearing centre at Lambeth, and consideration is being given to replicating that success elsewhere in the country.

Mr. Malins: May I suggest that the Minister consider increasing the time limit within which an appeal may be lodged following an adjudicator's decision in an asylum case from the current five days to, say, 14 days? The problem with the five-day limit is that enormous numbers of appeals being lodged are not well thought out. Appeals are being lodged in haste as a protective measure. Those appeals clog up the system, increasing the time within which individual appeals could be heard. Increasing the time limit might help.

Mr. Hoon: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's suggestions. We shall consider urgently all proposals to deal with the backlog. The hon. Gentleman should know that, of the 33,000 appeals outstanding, 22,000 relate to asylum cases. It is clear that there is an urgent need to deal with this problem.

Mr. Gerrard: My hon. Friend has mentioned possible changes in policy, such as abolishing primary purpose. Such changes will be welcome and will make a great difference to the number of appeals being heard. Will my hon. Friend confirm that when those changes occur his Department will liaise with the Home Office so that appeals, the number of which will be reduced, are dealt with speedily? That would be another method of reducing the backlog.

Mr. Hoon: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his suggestion. As he suggested, it is primarily a matter for the Home Office. My hon. Friend will be aware that about 10 per cent. of the backlog of cases are concerned with primary purpose. We anticipate that abolition of the primary purpose rule will speedily sort out many of the problems.

Legal Aid

28. **Mr. Baker:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what plans he has to change the qualifying criteria for legal aid. [392]

Mr. Hoon: The new Government pledged in their manifesto to undertake a wide-ranging review of the civil justice system and of legal aid.

Mr. Baker: I am grateful for that reply. Is the Minister aware that only 47 per cent. of people now qualify for legal aid, compared with 70 per cent. in 1979? Is that not a severe indictment of the previous Conservative Government? Is the Minister further aware that,

notwithstanding the people on legal aid and the very rich, huge numbers of people are, in effect, barred by financial circumstances from access to law? Is that not an affront in a civilised country? What steps will the hon. Gentleman take to rectify that?

Mr. Hoon: That is why our manifesto refers to the need for a review of not only the civil justice system, but legal aid. The hon. Gentleman should bear in mind the fact, however, that the cost of legal aid has doubled since the beginning of the decade. In 1990-91, net expenditure was £682 million; for 1996-97, it is expected to be £1.5 billion. The increase in 1996-97 alone is expected to be 6.2 per cent., which is more than double the rate of inflation.

Mr. Mitchell: Having accepted my congratulations on his appointment, does my hon. Friend agree that, although it is a good thing to have a Government who will undertake a review of legal aid, instead of making the system leaner and access more restricted, it would be sensible to run the system more economically by having an employed solicitor service operating through a public defender service, so that legal aid and its services could be made available much more cheaply to a far wider proportion of the population?

Mr. Hoon: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his suggestion. He will know from the manifesto on which he was elected that the Government are committed to investigating the possibility of developing a community legal service. One of our initiatives will be to bring together the expertise currently available in the professions and in the voluntary sector. We think that, together, they can make a significant contribution towards ensuring that as many of our citizens as possible have access to high-quality legal advice.

Mr. Streeter: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his appointment, and wish him every success with his important responsibilities. Will he explain to the House how, having turned their back on a cash-limited budget, the Labour Government intend to keep control of legal aid spending in the next five years?

Mr. Hoon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his good wishes. He struggled with these problems in previous months. He knows better than I the difficulties that we face with an expanding legal aid bill. I do not propose to repeat the figures that I gave the House a few minutes ago, save to say that we all face the challenge of ensuring that as many citizens as possible have access to high-quality legal advice while recognising that that can be achieved only within reasonable financial limitations.

Ethnic Minority Magistrates

29. **Mr. Corbyn:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what plans he has to increase the number of magistrates from ethnic minority communities. [394]

Mr. Hoon: In making their recommendations, the Lord Chancellor's advisory committees have regard to the need to ensure that the composition of the bench broadly reflects the area that it serves in terms of age, gender,

place of residence, politics, occupation and ethnic origin. To that end, a survey of the ethnic origin of serving magistrates is being undertaken. The Lord Chancellor will decide, in the light of its results—which will be made available in the autumn—what further initiatives may be necessary, both nationally and locally.

Mr. Corbyn: I thank the Minister for his reply and congratulate him on his appointment. When the survey is finally published, will he consider carefully the possibility of establishing a national policy and guidelines to ensure that magistrates panels contain sufficient numbers of persons from ethnic minorities? If necessary, will he give the Lord Chancellor's Department powers to override the local nomination committees to ensure that those national guidelines are adhered to? I am sure that he would agree with me that it is unacceptable for magistrates benches in some areas to be totally unrepresentative of the communities that they judge.

Mr. Hoon: Once again, I am grateful for the good wishes. The Lord Chancellor's local advisory committees already undertake a range of recruitment initiatives, including advertising in the ethnic minority press, distributing leaflets and posters and contacting ethnic community organisations. In addition, the Lord Chancellor's Department each year funds advertisements in the national ethnic minority press. As my hon. Friend recognises, it is clearly important for the Lord Chancellor's Department to continue to fund initiatives locally to attract candidates from the ethnic minority community. We shall press to ensure that those efforts are redoubled.

Mr. John M. Taylor: In the course of his duties, will the Minister be good enough to put a note in the Library about the progress that has been made so far with the amalgamation of magistrates courts committee areas? Many of us in the west midlands are watching the position with some anxiety.

Mr. Hoon: Yes.

Scottish Devolution

30. Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will make a statement on his role in Her Majesty's Government's proposals for Scottish devolution. [395]

Mr. Hoon: Scottish devolution is principally a matter for my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland. The Lord Chancellor's Department is one of a number of Departments that are concerned.

Mr. Dalyell: What account is the Lord Chancellor's Committee taking of the natural desire of many Scots working in England to have their say in the referendum?

Mr. Hoon: The key criterion for voting in the referendum will be residence in Scotland. That is why we have provided that all those currently on the local government register in Scotland will be entitled to vote. All Scots who live in England and are registered as local government electors in Scotland will therefore be eligible to vote. The Government are currently considering the

most effective way of making the public aware of the "absent voting" provisions, which will be in place at the time of the referendum.

Sir Teddy Taylor: As the Lord Chancellor's Department knows better than anyone, this is a fundamental, massive and costly constitutional change. Will the Minister seek to persuade his colleagues that it would be outrageous and unthinkable for it to be introduced without a clear indication that a substantial majority in Scotland wanted it? Could we at least have a 40 per cent. rule to ensure that it will not happen unless a majority in Scotland want it?

Mr. Hoon: As the hon. Gentleman knows full well, there will be opportunities for all Members of Parliament to debate and vote on such a matter in due course.

Court Procedures

31. Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what measures he proposes to modernise procedures within the courts; and if he will make a statement. [396]

Mr. Hoon: The Government plan to conduct a review of the present proposals for reform of civil procedures and the legal aid system. An announcement will be available in due course. On the criminal side, we will streamline procedures so that we halve the time it takes to get persistent young offenders from arrest to sentencing. Both are important measures which are relevant to modernising court procedures.

Mr. Mackinlay: Has the Minister noticed that the most popular and successful Speaker manages to preside over the High Court of Parliament without wearing a full-bottomed wig? Is it not time that the compulsory wearing of Jacobean garb in our courts was ended?

We still maintain the dock system in criminal trials, although it is intimidatory and, I think, prejudicial to fair trials. Will that be reviewed?

Mr. Hoon: Policy on court dress is indeed a matter for which the Lord Chancellor has policy responsibility. A practice direction was made on 11 April 1995 by the then Lord Chancellor Mackay, after consultation with the Lord Chief Justice and heads of divisions.

On a personal note, I have great sympathy with the point made by my hon. Friend. I recall the first time that I appeared in a Crown court. I should have been worrying about the law with which I was having to deal; I should have been worried about the defendant whom I was representing; what I was really worried about was whether my wig was going to stay on my head.

Mr. Peter Bottomley: The Minister rightly referred to the criminal side of the courts. In the two and a half weeks since the Government changed—I do not blame the new Government for this—about 6,000 people have been convicted of a serious criminal offence for the first time. Would it be for the Minister's Department to commission

research, especially among young people, examining their life circumstances to establish which of their habits—and their families' habits—are more likely to be associated with less persistent trouble with the law? Bringing people up in a way that makes them likely to get into trouble, and then condemning them when they are in trouble, is not always the most effective way forward.

Mr. Hoon: The hon. Gentleman makes a valuable suggestion, but I think that he would do better to direct it at my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary.

Mr. Bermingham: When reviewing the whole question of civil law, will the Minister consider the problems that are now being highlighted in respect of the Woolf report and the fast-track system? He might also consider a further slight amendment to the legal aid system that would save an awful lot of time: allowing the

Crown court to grant legal aid for specialist evidence, rather than referring it to the Legal Aid Board, which causes insufferable delays and, therefore, delays in trials.

Mr. Hoon: The Lord Chancellor has indicated his support for the spirit of Lord Woolf's recommendations, which are designed to deliver a civil justice system that is quicker, simpler and cheaper. As we proposed in the manifesto on which my hon. Friend and I were elected, we shall undertake a review of the civil justice reforms and of legal aid; it will examine the workability, cost and benefits of the reforms. Meanwhile, we are continuing with the programme of work that should still enable us to deliver the reforms to the original target if that option were to be endorsed. We want to keep all the options open on this matter.

My hon. Friend made a helpful proposal on legal aid. I shall meet representatives of the Legal Aid Board later this week and discuss that matter with them.

Members of Parliament (Oath)

3.30 pm

Mr. Tony Benn (Chesterfield): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. I again rise on the question of your statement about the position of Members of Parliament who have not taken the oath. When you made the statement on Wednesday, it had the force of the common law of Parliament, and in due course it will be embodied in "Erskine May". Of course, when the election took place on 1 May the law of Parliament was quite clear and "Erskine May" states:

"But although until he has taken the oath a Member may not sit and vote, he . . . is entitled to all the other privileges of a Member (but not to his salary), being regarded, both by the House and by the law, as qualified to serve, until some other disqualification has been shown to exist."

John Bright sat and voted on a Committee of the House before he had taken the oath.

I sent you a memorandum on a broader question, Madam Speaker, but the position that I want to put to you is that those electors who voted for the two hon. Members concerned voted on the basis that although they may have been abstentionist in their policy towards the Chamber, they would be entitled to all the rights of Members in safeguarding the interests of constituents. In the light of your statement, the hon. Members for Belfast, West (Mr. Adams) and for Mid-Ulster (Mr. McGuinness) are denied the right to represent their electors in the broad and full way of other hon. Members.

In the memorandum that I submitted to you, which raises a range of other questions, the matter of privilege arose. But my present point is supplementary to that. Is it right that the law of Parliament should be changed retrospectively in a way that denies electors the rights that they legitimately believed they had when they voted, but which they now find have been taken away? I am aware that the Privileges Committee has not been set up and that

privilege should not be raised on the Floor of the House, but I would ask you to defer the deadline for the operation of your ruling until these aspects have been properly considered.

Madam Speaker: I shall certainly look carefully at the matters that the right hon. Gentleman raises. He should look carefully at the list of services that were appended to my statement. The right hon. Gentleman says that he wrote to me on a wider issue. That is indeed the case: I received a memorandum from him on Friday, the first paragraph of which raises the matter and asks me to look at it as a matter of privilege. I am doing precisely that and I shall respond to the right hon. Gentleman as soon as I am able to do so. Therefore, the matter should not be raised on the Floor of the House.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Ordered,

That Private Members' Bills shall have precedence over Government business on 28th November, 12th December 1997 and 16th, 23rd and 30th January, 6th and 13th February, 6th, 13th, 20th and 27th March, 24th April and 3rd July 1998.—[Mrs Ann Taylor.]

SITTINGS OF THE HOUSE

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No.12 (House not to sit on certain Fridays),

That the House shall not sit on the following Fridays: 13th June, 4th July, 31st October 1997 and 20th February, 3rd April, 1st and 15th May, 12th and 26th June and 10th July 1998.—[Mrs. Ann Taylor.]

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No.25 (Periodic adjournments),

That this House, at its rising on Thursday 22nd May, do adjourn till Monday 2nd June.—[Mrs. Ann Taylor.]

Question agreed to.

Orders of the Day

Debate on the Address

[FOURTH DAY]

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on Question [14 May],

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, as follows:—

Most Gracious Sovereign,

We, Your Majesty's most dutiful and loyal subjects, the Commons of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, in Parliament assembled, beg leave to offer our humble thanks to Your Majesty for the Gracious Speech which Your Majesty has addressed to both Houses of Parliament.—
[Mr. Kaufman.]

Question again proposed.

Home Affairs

Madam Speaker: I have selected the amendment in the name of the Leader of the Opposition.

3.33 pm

Mr. David Maclean (Penrith and The Border): I beg to move as an amendment to the Address the words standing in the name of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and others, namely, at end add:

But humbly regret the lack of a firm commitment to implement the provisions of the Crime (Sentences) Bill 1997 to give second time serious violent and sexual offenders automatic life sentences from October 1997; seek the reinstatement of the original provisions of that Bill to give third time burglars and dealers in hard drugs mandatory minimum sentences of three and seven years respectively—save in exceptional circumstances; congratulate the previous Government on its achievements in tackling crime and protecting the public; and believe that the implications of the Government's proposal to incorporate the European Convention on Human Rights into British law should be carefully examined.

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. I am sure that the Minister has inadvertently made a mistake. He said that he was moving the amendment in the name of the Prime Minister. I am sure that he meant in the name of the Leader of the Opposition.

Madam Speaker: I know full well that Members on both sides of the House have made that mistake. It will take a day or two perhaps to get used to it.

Mr. Maclean: It shows that I am an optimist, but I apologise to the House for that slip. I notice that the hon. Member for Burnley (Mr. Pike) called me the Minister—he may be optimistic, too.

Nevertheless, that does not detract from what I was endeavouring to say. I congratulate most sincerely the right hon. Member for Blackburn (Mr. Straw) on his appointment as Home Secretary. I also congratulate others on the Front Bench on their appointments to the Home Office, in particular perhaps the Minister of State, Home Office, the hon. Member for Cardiff, South and Penarth (Mr. Michael), who is doing, in essence, my old job. I thought that I had a heavy portfolio in the Home Office, but, from examining his ministerial responsibilities, he seems to be doing about twice what I endeavoured to do.

I hope that he has doubled the number of his private office staff assisting him and that, as a result of his increased duties, the other members of the ministerial team are not drawing their full salary.

I wish all Labour Members well in their endeavours. May I also take this opportunity to thank publicly the staff whom I encountered at the Home Office, who worked with me, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard) and others? They served us well and they will serve the new Government well. It was a pleasure to work with the staff, to take their advice and, occasionally, not to take their advice. Whether we took it or not, it was always diligently given and it was a pleasure to work with them.

Holding office is a great honour, which, I believe, we discharged with integrity. Some serious allegations have been made about the conduct of my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe as Home Secretary. I know that he intends to rebut them comprehensively later this evening. Personally, I have just one point to add. I have worked with him closely for the past five years, first at the Department of the Environment and then at the Home Office. It was a great honour to work for him. He was absolutely meticulous in ensuring total accuracy in all his words and in all his dealings with Parliament and others. He was a man of integrity who has my full respect, not because he was my boss, but because he is a decent man who deserves it.

The new Government acquire a goodly inheritance. In the past four years, crime has fallen by 10 per cent. in England and Wales. That is more than 500,000 fewer crimes, the biggest fall in recorded crime since records were first collected in the middle of the last century. Over the same period, burglary fell by about 15 per cent.—that is almost 100,000 fewer burglaries—and theft fell by 16 per cent, which is more than 450,000 fewer thefts.

The police of course deserve much of the credit for that success. They have totally transformed the way in which they fight crime by targeting persistent offenders. Operation Bumblebee, of which we have all heard, is run by the Metropolitan police and has led to some 9,000 arrests. Policing must be a matter for chief constables and not for civil servants in Whitehall, but we have consistently supported zero-tolerance policing initiatives against low-level offending and anti-social behaviour where chief constables have thought such initiatives appropriate—for example, in Hartlepool and King's Cross. The police, however, do not operate in a vacuum. They need the help and support of Government. We have provided that help and support.

During our period of office, spending on the police service increased by more than any other part of Government spending, up by 100 per cent., even after allowing for inflation. That helped to pay for about 16,000 extra police officers and 18,400 extra civilians to help them.

Mr. Pike: Despite all that the right hon. Member claims the Government did, is it not true that, after 18 years, more people dare not go out at certain times of the day, particularly women and old people, because of crime and the fear of crime? Is not that a sad condemnation of our society?

Mr. Maclean: The hon. Gentleman is right to mention many people's—particularly elderly people's—fear of

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crime. His point would cut more ice, however, if he had also said that crime is feared in an exactly inverse proportion by those who have the most to fear from it. Crime against the elderly and women—whether it is being mugged in their own home or in the street—represents a very small proportion of all crime in the United Kingdom. Moreover, violence represents a small proportion of all crime. Incidents of violence against individuals involve mainly young men, who are involved in violent crime both as perpetrators and as victims. The elderly, however, fear crime the most.

All hon. Members have an obligation not to scare people or to instil fear of crime. Now that the hon. Member for Burnley (Mr. Pike) is sitting on the Government Benches, perhaps he will wish not to scare as many people as he did when he was an Opposition Member. The current Opposition will draw attention to any failings that we think that the new Government may exhibit in dealing with crime, but we will not attempt to scare the public in the manner practised by some former Opposition Members. That did a great disservice to many people by causing an unnecessary fear of crime.

The former Government provided support for the police. We provided, for example, the financial support that allowed the police to recruit those 16,000 extra police officers. Among the excellent civil servants that the Home Secretary will find at the Home Office are those who are skilled in numeracy and in accounting. I therefore hope that he will be able to confirm the accuracy of the figures on police numbers that I and my right hon. and learned Friend the shadow Home Secretary have long been issuing.

In the next few months, I may table a parliamentary question—perhaps from further back on the Opposition Benches—to request information from Ministers confirming that Britain is close to having 100,000 police constables, which will be an all-time record. I look forward to receiving the Government's confirmation of that figure, which was strenuously denied by Labour during the general election.

We have provided the police with the most up-to-date technology, such as a DNA database. That database is the first of its type in the world, and now contains information on 100,000 criminals, who are now literally marked men. We evened up the scales of justice, to ensure that the law worked to help and not to hinder the police in fighting crime.

We also reformed the right of silence. Hardened criminals can no longer stay silent in the knowledge that their silence will remain a secret. Since we initiated that reform, the number of suspects refusing to answer simple police questions has almost halved. It would seem rather churlish to remind the Government that, only two years ago, they ridiculed that programme.

We left office with high police morale and high police numbers. I ask the House to compare our record with that of the previous Labour Government, whose actions so exasperated the police that they were threatening strike action when that Government left office. I hope that that situation never arises again.

We pursued policies that were based on a clear set of principles: criminals must be held responsible for their crimes and appropriately punished; victims' interests must

be at the heart of our criminal justice system; and public protection must come first. For a first-time offender, the most appropriate punishment may well be a caution. Cautioning repeat or serious offenders, however, undermines public confidence in the criminal justice system, which is why, in March 1994, my right hon. and learned Friend issued new guidance to the police to discourage repeat cautioning and cautioning for serious offences. Consequently, in 1995, the number of cautions fell by 5 per cent.

The most appropriate punishment for a less serious offender is probably a community sentence. Community sentences, however, have to be a proper punishment and not a soft option. For serious and persistent criminals, the best place is prison. Our clear view is that prison works. Criminals cannot commit more crime while in prison. That is not only self-evident, but research conducted by the Home Office—which the Home Secretary will no doubt eventually discover—suggests that between three and 13 offences could be prevented for each and every domestic burglar imprisoned for a year instead of given a community sentence. Of course, the threat of prison helps to deter others from committing crime, as the Chief Constable of Lancashire, Pauline Clare, pointed out in her letter to me on 12 September 1995. She said:

"There is no doubt that the fear of imprisonment is an extremely effective deterrent".

We need, of course, to do everything we can to rehabilitate criminals while they are in prison. That is the main reason why we introduced mandatory drugs testing throughout the Prison Service and why the number of hours that prisoners spend in education and training more than doubled from 4.6 million in 1979 to 9.4 million in 1995.

Throughout our period in office, we had little help from the then Opposition. In 1988, they voted against increasing the maximum penalty for taking a gun to a crime to life imprisonment. They voted against giving the Attorney-General the right of appeal against lenient sentences. In 1991, they voted against giving the courts the power to make parents attend court with their children. In 1994, they also voted against reforming the right to silence. The Prime Minister, who was then Labour's home affairs spokesman, described our approach as "open to potential injustice", despite the fact that the then Lord Chief Justice believed that it introduced

"an element of common sense and realism which has been sadly lacking hitherto".

I shall not recite the catalogue of all the occasions on which the then official Opposition voted against the law and order reforms and tough measures that we were taking against crime. Fortunately, Labour's Front-Bench team appears to have seen the error of its ways, and it would be churlish of me not to accept that at face value. I hope that it is a genuine conversion, not one of convenience.

Mr. Michael Clapham (Barnsley, West and Penistone): The right hon. Gentleman has recited a catalogue, but, as two thirds of the current criminal statutes were introduced over the past 17 years, yet crime increased during that period, does that not show that there is a need for a new approach—an approach which this Government have brought to the scene?

Mr. Maclean: Yes, there was an increase in crime in the 1980s, as happened in all countries in the western

world. However, Britain was unique in the last four years in that it had a falling crime rate—a record which had not been matched for more than 100 years. It was clear that the approach taken by my right hon. and learned Friend the former Home Secretary—an approach involving changing the law, strengthening the police service and targeting burglars and persistent criminals—was working and reducing crime. There was no reason why that approach could not have continued to be successful over the next five years. The hon. Gentleman will be hard pushed to find another country with a consistently falling crime rate for four successive years.

Mr. A. J. Beith (Berwick-upon-Tweed): Were that approach to be continued, it would be necessary to build at least 12 new prisons in addition to those already planned to deal with overcrowding in order to meet the requirements of the Crime (Sentences) Act 1997. Home Office research suggests that there might be even more prisons for which the previous Government made no financial provision. How could the approach have been continued?

Mr. Maclean: The right hon. Gentleman is wrong. When we were in government, we made financial provision up to, I think, the year 2010 for the extra prison places required as we implemented the Crime (Sentences) Act 1997. The new prison places would not be required immediately, which the right hon. Gentleman should know. Our White Paper set out the scale of provision required. The same approach cannot be continued exactly because the right hon. Gentleman and his party were among those who sabotaged that Act as it went through the House in the closing stages of the last Parliament.

Nevertheless, the official Opposition firmly believe that the "prison works" policy is successful. We do not have to lock up every criminal, but if we lock up the hardened and persistent burglars and drug dealers—those who commit the bulk of crimes—we make a disproportionate impact on crime across the country. That is what our research has shown over the past few years.

Mr. Clive Soley (Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush): I am not sure whether this has occurred to the right hon. Gentleman, but it is too late to win the last general election. I wonder whether he would like to reconsider his approach. The position has been made worse by an awful lot of things that the last Government did not do. That is one reason why they lost. Will he direct his comments to crime prevention, about which the Conservatives did virtually nothing? Will he refer to victim support, for which they cut the money? Will he talk about the damage that the last Conservative Government did to families and parenting, which underlies many of the problems that we face? A little humility might help them do better at the next election, even if they still will not win it.

Mr. Maclean: A little accuracy might help the hon. Gentleman. The information that he has given to the House is not as accurate as one would wish it to be. He is wrong to suggest that little was done to prevent crime—we set up an agency on crime prevention. The crime prevention initiatives are partly responsible for the fall in crime over recent years, particularly car crime, which has seen a large fall. The hon. Gentleman is also wrong to assert that financial help for the victims of crime has been cut.

I am perfectly happy to accept the result of the general election and I congratulate the Labour party on a magnificent win. However, I do not believe that, having lost the election, we should throw overboard all the policies that we believe were working well. That may be the approach of new Labour, but it is not my approach as an old Tory.

Mr. Tom Cox (Tooting): Before the right hon. Gentleman leaves the subject of prison, will he tell us whether, during his time as a Minister, he read the reports of the Chief Inspector of Prisons, who repeatedly condemned prison conditions during the Conservatives' term of office? Talking to anyone who works in the Prison Service, one hears criticism after criticism of the administration that the new Government have inherited from the right hon. Gentleman and his right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard).

Mr. Maclean: I hear what the hon. Gentleman says. It is always possible to find criticisms of prisons, but the facts are that the amount of education and training in prisons has increased, prison conditions have improved enormously and prison overcrowding has been all but eliminated. However, what matters is ensuring that we have adequate prison places for those hardened and dangerous persistent offenders who need to be taken out of public circulation, where they may create more victims. That is the first duty of the Government. We fulfilled that duty assiduously.

We have yet to see the full details of the Bill on crime and disorder announced in the Gracious Speech. From what we have heard so far, we support its broad objectives. We particularly welcome its emphasis on faster justice and tackling juvenile crime. At the beginning of this year, we published two papers—a report into delays in the criminal justice system and a Green Paper on preventing children from offending. I hope that the new Government will take forward the proposals in both those papers.

I accept that our criminal justice system is too slow. Liaison between the police and the Crown Prosecution Service needs to be closer. Juvenile criminals should be brought to court more quickly. The Government propose having a Crown prosecutor in every area. Labour Members should remember that in 1993 the number of operational units in the CPS was increased from 31 to 98. As a result, they match police force areas closely.

In the north-east, for example, there are six operational units, three of which match Cumbria, Durham and Cleveland forces almost exactly. Newcastle has its own CPS operational unit, headed by a branch Crown prosecutor. What would happen to those operational units under the Home Secretary's proposals? Would Newcastle's operational unit be replaced by a more distant chief Crown prosecutor for the whole of Northumbria?

I welcome the Government's aim to halve the time taken for persistent young offenders to be caught and sentenced, but I am not entirely convinced that the way in which they aim to cut delays is the most sensible available to them or that it will deliver the results they intend. I urge the Home Secretary and the Minister of State to consider carefully the proposals in "The Review of Delay in the Criminal Justice System", known in the

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Home Office as the Martin Narey report. The report suggested that courts be given new powers to caution juvenile offenders and to attach meaningful conditions to a conditional discharge. At the moment, if the police are unsure whether to caution or charge a young offender, they must refer the case to an inter-agency panel. That can take weeks. It would be far better, perhaps, to commit the case to court straight away and let the court decide.

Delays in the youth courts could be cut by removing 17-year-olds from their jurisdiction. The Narey report was written by a Home Office civil servant and had no political input—[*Interruption.*] That excellent report had no political input until we published it and presented it to the House. The Home Secretary may wish to use a new broom to sweep away all that is before him, and he may be tempted to discard reports published by the previous Government because he feels that they are politically tainted. It would be a grave mistake not to pay close attention to the Narey report, which had no political input into its formulation until my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe presented it to the House.

We agree with the Government about the need to prevent youngsters from turning to crime—particularly by making parents more responsible for their children's actions. Indeed, in 1991, we gave the courts the power to bind over parents to take good care of their children. That was another of the things that—no doubt by accident—the Labour party strongly opposed at the time.

I also commend "Preventing Children Offending", a consultation document which suggested a twin-track approach: early intervention to head youngsters off before they are tempted into a life of crime, and parental control orders—which do not seem a million miles away from orders of a similar name with which the Government are toying. A lot of good spadework has been done by the juvenile offenders unit at the Home Office in writing that report. The consultation period is now closed, and the report will now enter the ministerial mincer for consideration. I suggest to the Home Secretary that the twin-track approach in the report should commend it to the Government.

We believe that although it is important to head youngsters off from entering a life of crime, they ought to be properly punished if they do enter that life. For a first-time or less serious offender, a caution may well be appropriate, but it is not appropriate for repeat offenders who must face the consequences of their crimes. In the previous Parliament, we legislated for secure training centres for persistent 12 to 14-year-old offenders. The aim of the centres is to combine strict discipline, education and training for one express purpose—to steer youngsters away from crime when they are released. Before the election, we signed a contract for the first STC at Cookham Wood in Kent. Perhaps the Home Secretary will state whether the Government plan to push ahead with the other STCs, or whether they will opt a softer alternative.

We believe that the probation service, rather than social services, should be responsible for enforcing community punishment for those under 16. Social services are naturally concerned with the welfare of children—that is their job—but that can put them in a difficult position

when supervising younger offenders. It is a role which could be more suitable for the probation service to perform.

In the previous Session, we introduced the Crime Bill which had one simple aim—to protect the public from dangerous and persistent criminals. The Home Secretary was quick to claim to support automatic life sentences for repeat rapists and the like. As he knows, we always intended to implement those proposals in October this year. I hope that he will confirm to the House that he intends to do the same.

I would also urge the right hon. Gentleman to think again on mandatory minimum sentences for career burglars and dealers in hard drugs. Let me remind the House of the facts: the maximum penalty for domestic burglary is 14 years, but a sample of domestic burglars convicted in the Crown court in 1993 and 1994 shows that the average prison sentence for a first-time offender was 16.2 months and it was only 18.9 months for a third conviction. For a seventh conviction, it was barely higher—at only 19.4 months—and, indeed, we found that 28 per cent. of offenders with seven or more convictions were not sent to prison at all.

While most dealers in hard drugs are sent to prison, the average sentence for a third offence is just four years. Our proposals, which the Labour party voted to wreck, would have ensured that third-time burglars and dealers in hard drugs received three and seven years in prison respectively. I urge the Government to reinstate those provisions in their crime Bill.

As I said earlier, we shall judge each of the Government's proposals on its merits. If it is sensible, we shall support it. I regret that so often when the Labour party was in opposition, it did not support proposals that were to the advantage of this country and which they now claim to support or have adopted as policy. It is the job of the Loyal Opposition to support proposals that are in our country's interest and help to bear down in the fight against crime. We shall oppose only those that are contrary to this country's interest and do not assist the police or do not bear down in the fight against crime.

Hon. Members who sat on the Opposition Benches and who now sit on the Government Benches won the election and sit where they are now because they promised not to dismantle the reforms that have been made over the past 18 years. They promised not to dismantle the reforms to the criminal justice system, and reforms to curb the excesses of the trade unions will not be changed either. Reforms to create a free market will not be changed—the Labour party now believes in a version of capitalism and the enterprise economy. Labour Members now espouse our principles and our policies, despite having fought them every inch of the way at the time. I hope that they will now stand firm and stick to those principles and policies. If they fail to do so, we shall lose no opportunity to remind the electorate that behind all the glitz, glamour and sound bites of new Labour there still lurks the beast that voted against all those reforms over the past 18 years.

4.2 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Jack Straw): I thank the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) for the generosity of his congratulations to myself and my hon. Friends on our appointments. I should like to add, parenthetically,

that I am grateful to the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard) for his congratulations, which were conveyed to me privately.

I congratulate the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border on the tone of his speech. As one of the world's experts on opposition, having spent all but two weeks of my 18 years in Parliament on the Opposition Benches and having been present on the Front Bench after Labour's catastrophic defeat in 1983, I know that making the first speech on the Loyal Address after such a defeat is not an easy matter and the right hon. Gentleman made his with great dignity and tone.

I want to commence by offering my own tribute to Sir Michael Shersby, who died so suddenly and so tragically just 11 days ago. Sir Michael was loyal both to his party and to his colleagues, but he was also able to talk frankly and freely to hon. Members on the other side of the House. As he and I shared common interests in police and criminal justice issues, I talked with him a great deal. I valued not only his views but his advice. With his family, friends and colleagues, I shall sorely miss him.

This is my first speech in this Session and I am delighted to be making it from this side of the Chamber. I shall shortly give details of the proposals in the Queen's Speech, but first I shall set out our approach in context.

On election day, 1 May, the British people overwhelmingly endorsed the Prime Minister's appeal that, after 18 years of Conservative administration, our nation deserved better. The better society that we want to build is one that fosters and celebrates strong British values: decency, reward for hard work; tolerance and respect for others. It is one in which rights for everyone are matched by responsibilities for all.

The legislation in the Gracious Speech that I shall introduce to the House will set a framework for underpinning those British values; for restoring responsibilities and for better protecting rights. That may sound abstract. But the benefits that should flow will be real and concrete for individuals, for families and for communities throughout the United Kingdom. We want to bring about changes in the way in which people relate to one another by changing people's public behaviour and their sense of responsibility towards one another.

We want to reclaim our towns, cities and villages so that everyone is free to go about their neighbourhood in safety and security.

Some people would deny that any Government can achieve such changes. But the Government have at their disposal more effective levers than are available to any private individual or agency. The Government also have the responsibility—the moral duty—to use the power that they have for the good of all.

Martin Luther King said:

"Morality cannot be legislated, but behaviour can be regulated.

Judicial decrees may not change the heart, but they can restrain the heartless."

Laws can help to shape more tolerant values and a better society. We need only consider the Race Relations Acts, introduced by two previous Labour Governments and passed by the House in the 1960s and 1970s.

There was then the predictable outcry from our opponents, claiming that free speech and individual liberties were being threatened; but although more needs

to be done, those Acts succeeded in enhancing the rights of black and Asian people in Britain and in encouraging racial tolerance and understanding in our society.

If the cynics are still unconvinced, let me point to the conclusive negative proof of the power of Governments to influence behaviour. Madam Speaker, you may bridle, if you like, at my belief that good government can encourage good behaviour, but let no one doubt that bad government leads to bad behaviour.

For the past 18 years, Britain had a Government who preached the values of self-interest above everything else. It should therefore come as no surprise that some people then chose to ignore their responsibilities to other people. Where there is

"no such thing as society",

there can be no shared standards of behaviour. Where there is a steady erosion of community, of shared values, links between individuals collapse and people become fearful and distrustful of others. It's "Get what you can, don't worry about anyone else"—the instincts of those who commit crime.

Crime is the ultimate selfish act. It results from the breakdown of rules and from an evasion of responsibility for other people. That, I suggest, was why, every time that the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe opened his mouth during the general election campaign, the British people were powerfully reminded of the Conservatives' culpability for the high levels of crime and disorder that they had suffered in the previous 18 years. That was why his hysterical claim that I was the "burglar's friend" helped persuade floating voters in their droves to vote for Labour candidates.

For weeks I have nurtured the thought that perhaps that was the purpose in the mind of the former Secretary of State. After all, as has become clear, he and I shared a common goal: we both wished to see the right hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major) out of Downing street.

On Monday 12 May, the results of an international crime victimisation survey were presented at a conference in the Netherlands. That survey gave the lie to the claim by the shadow Home Secretary and of the shadow shadow Home Secretary, the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border, that; under the stewardship of the Conservative Government this country had become safer. The survey showed that, by international standards, England and Wales continue to have very high levels of property crime and violent crime. More than one third of people surveyed in England and Wales had been victims of crime in the previous year. That record was worse than that of the United States and beaten only by the Netherlands. Not surprisingly, the survey also showed that people in England and Wales are more anxious than other nationalities about their safety on the streets.

The one comfort to be drawn from this international survey—and a most important one—is that our police forces enjoy internationally high levels of confidence from the public.

Law and order featured high in the list of people's concerns during the election campaign. That is hardly surprising, of course. Crime doubled during the Tory years, while the number of criminals punished actually fell by a third.

What was surprising, however, was that once the election had begun, the Conservative party did not even attempt to engage on the issue and to argue its case. After

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some hopeless early skirmishes, including the charge that I was the burglar's friend, the right hon. and learned Gentleman simply gave up and accepted defeat.

The so-called party of law and order held just one press conference on the issue in the five weeks of the election campaign. The Conservative party apparently still suffers from this blindspot. In the debate on the Queen's Speech on 14 May, the Leader of the Opposition did not see fit to mention crime once.

I ask the House to contrast that with our approach—new policies on neighbourhood disorder, on tackling drink-related crime, on major improvements to the youth justice system, on new protection for children under 10, and on reforms of the Crown Prosecution Service. Many aspects of these proposals will be contained in a new crime and disorder Bill which will be introduced to the House later in this session.

I believe that we commanded the confidence of the public because our analysis and prescription chimed with theirs. The public are not fools. They know that crime has causes; that while criminal behaviour can never be excused, social and economic factors such as deprivation and unemployment are bound to create conditions in which people can more easily be tempted into crime.

The public wanted action on the causes of crime—but saw that they were never going to get that from the former Administration. They will however get it from this Government, not least with our welfare to work programme financed by the proceeds of a windfall tax.

The public also desperately wanted firm action against crime and disorder. Instead, the Conservative Government stubbornly pursued a narrow approach. It did not work. Eighteen years ago, the system that we left to the Conservatives was much more effective at nipping offending in the bud. Recorded crime in 1979 was half the level suffered today; but 50 per cent. more offenders were being convicted and the prison population was lower by 20,000.

Our prison population today is 60,000 and rising. Many—indeed most—of those prisoners began their criminal careers as young offenders. The previous Government's failure to tackle youth crime effectively has contributed both to the high levels of crime and to the record prison population which we face today.

Nowhere is the need for action to tackle crime and disorder more pressing than with young offenders. Last November, the Audit Commission pronounced a telling verdict on the previous Administration's record on juvenile crime. In a major report, the commission said this:

"Overall, less is done now than 10 years ago to address offending by young people."

By contrast with that record of indolence and inactivity, our new Prime Minister has made action against youth crime one of the Government's top five priorities. He has pledged that we will cut by one half the time taken to process persistent young offenders from arrest to sentence. At present, it takes on average four and a half months for a young criminal to be punished for his or her crime, and often much longer for persistent offenders. Young offenders are given the impression that they can offend repeatedly without punishment. Far from nipping bad behaviour in the bud, the present youth justice system perversely reinforces much bad behaviour.

We will take measures in the crime and disorder Bill to tackle these delays. We will also be taking early action in advance of legislation to encourage all agencies in the youth justice system to deal with cases more speedily. By speeding juvenile justice, we aim to ensure that young offenders are made to see the clear link between crime and punishment, and to face up to the consequences of their offending for their victims and for themselves.

The repeat offending of some youngsters wrecks their own lives and the lives of those whom they victimise. From the outset, it must be made clear to young people that they will not get away with offending. The response to youth crime must be rapid, consistent and effective.

The right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border mentioned the Narey report and suggested that we should take proper account of it. He was right to do so. I recognised, when the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe presented the outcome of the report to the House in February, that the report had many recommendations of which any Administration should take account in the most serious way. Based on the experience of the previous Government, this Government would welcome any constructive views about the methods that we intend to pursue in order to achieve what I gather from the right hon. Gentleman has now become a common goal.

We shall replace the archaic rule of *doli incapax*, which assumes—absurdly—that a child aged 10-13 cannot differentiate between right and wrong. Child protection orders will be available to deal with children aged 10 and under left out unsupervised late at night.

We shall end the practice of repeat cautions. There will be a single final warning, which will usually trigger effective intervention by youth offender teams. The right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border was also right to draw attention to the complex bureaucracy that currently obtains when cautions are being administered. We want a system—perhaps slightly different from the one that he proposes, but we are happy to discuss it with him—where, even if cautions are administered outside the court system, the supervision of the court system is plainly with the courts and the police alone. Advice should be taken from other agencies, but one reason among many for the current delays is that no individual or agency is clearly responsible for running the youth justice system in England and Wales.

Mr. Andrew Rowe (Faversham and Mid-Kent): Does the Secretary of State accept that we have had considerable difficulty in ensuring that those children whom society regards as having parents who are not capable of looking after them are properly looked after in public care? As he extends society's capacity to look after those children, will he do everything in his power to ensure that society looks after them properly?

Mr. Straw: I share the hon. Gentleman's concern about the quality of care in some of our residential homes and the overall legislative framework. He may like to know that, with the Prime Minister's approval, I have appointed as my senior special adviser, Mr. Norman Warner, who chaired the previous Government inquiry into conditions in some children's homes. I take his work and recommendations and the whole issue extremely seriously.

There are some serious and persistent offenders for whom custody is necessary, either for sentencing or for remand purposes. We shall have in place a range of sentencing options for the courts, which will allow them to react appropriately both to protect the public and address the youngster's offending behaviour.

The crime and disorder Bill will also establish a new national youth justice board to monitor and set national standards for community and custodial sentences and to ensure a consistent and cost-effective response to young offenders right across the country.

Our emphasis on responsibility is not limited to young offenders and their parents. The wider community, including business, has a responsibility to encourage good behaviour in the young. That is why I condemn—I hope that the whole House does—the cynical and irresponsible behaviour of some in the drinks industry who have been targeting under-age drinkers with so-called alcopops.

We shall not forget the "order" part of law and order. Disorderly, anti-social behaviour causes alarm and distress. It heightens the fear of crime. We shall act to free communities from brutish and unacceptable behaviour. That is the purpose of the strategy of zero tolerance about which the Prime Minister and I have often spoken.

The crime and disorder Bill will give courts a new power to make community safety orders. Those orders will, at last, give the police and local authorities the powers that they need to tackle that blight on local communities.

There are some acts that deserve specific condemnation by the criminal law. Racial harassment and racially motivated violence deserve such condemnation, because of the corrosive effects that they have on the very fabric of society. We shall create new offences of racial harassment and racially motivated violence to protect ethnic minorities from intimidation and injury.

Our response to the unacceptable level of crime in Britain is to attack both crime and its causes. We will place a new responsibility on local authorities to develop statutory partnerships with the police to prevent crime and to enhance community safety.

Mr. Bernie Grant (Tottenham): I thank my right hon. Friend for giving way and congratulate him on his appointment. Does he agree that racial harassment and racial abuse are so obnoxious that we should set up a special squad, like the vice squad, the firearms squad and so on, of dedicated officers who could track down racists and make sure that they are brought to justice?

Mr. Straw: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his congratulations. The issue of whether an individual police force should set up a special squad is—I am sorry if my hon. Friend thinks that I sound a little like a Secretary of State—a matter for individual chief constables, but I certainly believe that his suggestion should be taken on board by chief constables. Different forces have different approaches to tackling the issue. In any event, we must ensure that every police officer, of whatever rank, is seized of the need to take firm and effective action against racial harassment and racial violence, wherever it takes place.

Support for our agenda on crime and disorder has been wide. Last week, the Police Federation added its backing for our proposals. Its chairman, Fred Broughton, said that

he welcomed the positive steps outlined in our crime and disorder Bill for tackling juvenile crime and for dealing with disorder, which he said

"can ruin the quality of life for whole communities."

I was glad to hear from the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border that he was offering his support, too, for our proposals.

Mr. Beith: The Home Secretary will also have heard from the Police Federation a challenge to increase the number of police officers, particularly when new responsibilities such as carrying out zero tolerance campaigns and dealing with racial attacks are added to their present responsibilities. Does the right hon. Gentleman hold out any hope of increasing the total number of police officers and, if so, how will he fund it?

Mr. Straw: The position is clear. We set it out at the election. Our position received rather greater endorsement than the right hon. Gentleman's. We have made it clear that for this year and for the following financial year, we stand by the departmental budgets that were provided in the public expenditure round last November.

I refused to get into a numbers game because under legislation which we supported and the previous Government introduced, the decision about how to use available finance is not for any Home Secretary, but for individual police forces. That is the reality and the legal position. That was why, even in the Conservative party's manifesto, which was so comprehensively rejected by the electorate, if one read the words carefully there was no straightforward pledge to increase police numbers; instead, there was a pledge which meant different things to different people, to provide the resources which chief constables could use to increase police numbers if, of course, the other demands on their budget had been met in other ways.

Mr. Robin Corbett (Birmingham, Erdington): While I acknowledge that the number of police officers, especially those on the beat, is important, will my right hon. Friend confirm that there is no single answer to combating violent crime, especially disorderly conduct, and that essentially, there must be partnerships between communities, business and local authorities?

Mr. Straw: I agree entirely with my hon. Friend. One of the things that we shall do through the crime and disorder Bill is to implement the recommendations of the Morgan report, updated. It recommended in 1990 that a statutory responsibility should be placed on local authorities to work in partnership with the police in dealing with crime and disorder. We shall also require each local authority, in partnership with the police, to set its own targets for reducing crime and disorder in its area. Of the many things that I found almost impossible to believe during the 18 years that I sat on the Opposition Benches and witnessed the then Government, I never, ever understood why they refused point blank to implement the Morgan report, on which there could clearly have been a consensus across the House.

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving way, and I thank him publicly for coming to Portland on Friday to examine the

[Mr. Ian Bruce]

floating prison facility. Many of his remarks revolve around the problems that we have faced for many years in getting cases through the Crown Prosecution Service. Nothing that the right hon. Gentleman has said so far will devote more resources to that area and solve the problems upon which many of his other remarks depend. Will he comment further on that issue?

Mr. Straw: If the hon. Gentleman can wait a second, I shall come to our proposals in respect of the Crown Prosecution Service. However, having spent a great deal of time in opposition examining the operation of the Crown Prosecution Service and having studied some very interesting insights in the Narey report about that service, I do not believe that the issue is about overall resources; it is a question of how those resources are used and how we can secure better and more effective co-operation between the Crown Prosecution Service and the police.

I turn now to sentencing. The former Conservative Cabinet Minister and former right hon. and learned Member for Putney, David Mellor, said last August that, under the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe, the present shadow Home Secretary, the Conservatives had "lost the plot" on law and order. I believe that the right hon. and learned Gentleman failed because he lacked a comprehensive strategy for dealing with crime and its causes: a flaw in his approach which is reflected in the narrowness of the amendment that is the subject of today's debate.

That amendment makes two demands. The first is for a commitment in respect of the provisions for automatic life sentences for second-time serious sexual and violent offenders. I told the right hon. and learned Gentleman and his right hon. Friend often enough when my party was in opposition that we supported the principle of that provision, and my view has not changed since 1 May. I hope to be able to meet the target date for implementation, set by the previous Government, of later this year. However, I shall not set a date until I am satisfied that sufficient provision within the Prison Service is available for those prisoners.

The right hon. and learned Gentleman can hardly complain about that, since he knows better than anyone that the projections of the rise in the prison population that were published before the election were optimistically on the low side. The reality that has confronted me is more serious than I thought it would be. We must address that situation. One of the ways in which I shall do so—to pick up the remarks by the hon. Member for South Dorset (Mr. Bruce)—is to take comprehensive action against delays in the criminal justice system. Reducing delays should help to reduce the numbers of prisoners held on remand.

The second demand made in the right hon. and learned Gentleman's amendment is for a reinstatement of the original provisions about exceptional circumstances in the Crime (Sentences) Act 1997. Those provisions were successfully amended by the Labour party in the Lords, and confirmed by the Commons, just before the election. It is a sign that the right hon. and learned Gentleman has failed to come to terms with his defeat that he has bothered to pursue that point—that he should try to fight the last war rather than the next, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush (Mr. Soley) said.

It was almost the only thing that he argued on law and order during the election—on those few occasions when Conservative central office let him off the leash.

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Alun Michael): Not very often.

Mr. Straw: My hon. Friend is right. The right hon. and learned Gentleman's view was comprehensively rejected by the electorate, and I have absolutely no intention of acceding to it. The measures that we intend to take in respect of sentencing were flagged in our manifesto. We will address the need for greater consistency in sentencing by the courts and extend the powers of the Attorney-General to appeal against unduly lenient sentences.

I turn now to the issue of drugs, as drug-taking and drug abuse are the cause of a huge amount of crime and disorder currently affecting society. Drugs devastate the lives of addicts, their families and their communities, and lead to much property and violent crime. Action to target crime and its causes must therefore include tough and realistic measures against drugs. To break the vicious circle of addiction and crime, we shall introduce a new drug treatment and testing order, requiring serious drug-addicted offenders to undergo treatment and random drug testing.

As the Prime Minister announced before the election, he will appoint a new drugs tsar with a wide role to lead the fight against drugs and to help educate young people not to take them. The drugs tsar will have the power to co-ordinate the efforts of the police, educationalists, social services, prisons, the probation service and health authorities. This appointment will build on arrangements established by the previous Administration that had our firm support.

Victims, too, often feel neglected by the criminal justice system. I am committed to improving the services that criminal justice agencies provide to the victims of crime. Victims should be kept fully informed of the progress of their cases, and should be told why charges have been downgraded or dropped. The police in some areas are piloting a system of "one-stop shops" to keep victims informed—a welcome indication of their commitment to better treatment of victims—but that task should not be left to the police alone.

Under the reorganisation of the Crown Prosecution Service, which my right hon. and learned Friend the Attorney-General will be taking forward shortly, the Crown Prosecution Service will be accountable for its decisions, particularly the local Crown prosecutors who will be put in place. They should be prepared to explain to victims their reasons for discontinuing or downgrading cases. We will also give greater protection to victims and witnesses in rape and other serious sexual offence cases, and take steps to protect those who may be subject to intimidation.

Mr. Alex Salmond (Banff and Buchan): As the Home Secretary will be aware, the previous Administration set up, with all-party support—perhaps the only initiative to have had all-party support—a Scotland against drugs campaign, in which the leaders of all the Scottish political parties sit. That committee meets on Friday. Before it meets, would it not be useful to consult it about the

Government's intentions? Will the Home Secretary give me an undertaking that that consultation will take place before moving ahead with the Government's plans to combat the drugs menace?

Mr. Straw: The hon. Gentleman's suggestion sounds sensible. I promise to pass it on to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland. I should add that my hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley, North and Sefton, East (Mr. Howarth), who has particular responsibility for drugs, hopes to be present at that meeting on Friday. We are very strongly open to suggestions. The campaign against drugs undertaken by the previous Government had our full support and backing. This is not an area in which any one party has a monopoly of wisdom or views.

Through legislation and through our actions, the Government will help to rebuild our society by promoting a culture of mutual respect for rights and responsibilities. An essential part of that project will be a Bill to incorporate the main provisions of the European convention on human rights into UK law. It is almost 50 years since the United Kingdom signed up to that European convention. Yet, because it has never been incorporated into United Kingdom law, our citizens must undergo the cost and delay of appealing to a Strasbourg court to enforce their rights under the convention.

We will bring rights home to the British people, making the rights and freedoms guaranteed under the European convention part of British law. This will provide the opportunity for our own courts to decide whether our citizens' rights are being properly observed. Incorporation will not detract from the sovereignty of this Parliament.

Mr. William Cash (Stone): In the light of the draft treaty on European union that has just been produced, will the right hon. Gentleman be good enough to tell the House the extent to which—in relation to home affairs and justice and the pillar that currently exists under the existing treaties—the Government would allow the Court of Justice to take a role in determining questions relating to the sovereignty of the United Kingdom in relation to those functions?

Mr. Straw: One of the problems with those who are single-subject obsessives is that they work the European Union and European Community into every issue under the sun. It may come as a surprise and a shock to the hon. Gentleman to learn, however, that the European convention on human rights has absolutely nothing whatever to do with the European Union. It was developed—

Mr. Cash rose—

Mr. Straw: No.

It was developed by British lawyers, including a very distinguished British Conservative lawyer who later became Lord Chancellor, Lord Kilmuir. It formed part of the Council of Europe not the European Union. *[Interruption.]* The intergovernmental conference has nothing whatever to do with what I was saying. I will come on to deal with our position on border controls in a moment.

I was going to refer in complimentary terms to the part of the Opposition's amendment that said that our proposals for incorporating—not the EU treaty—the

ECHR should be carefully examined. I agree with that sentiment. In opposition, we set out in detail our thinking in a consultative document "Bringing Rights Home". We held useful discussions on that document with the Liberal Democrats. If the hon. Gentleman has comments on our proposals about how we incorporate the ECHR into British law without affecting—as we intend—the sovereignty of Parliament, I shall be very happy to hear from him.

Among other matters discussed with the Liberal Democrats was the reform of voting systems, with a commitment in our manifesto for a referendum. This will be preceded by the establishment of, and then a report by, an independent commission on voting systems, which will be asked to recommend a proportional alternative to the first-past-the-post system. I recognise the importance attached to this matter by many hon. Members and I intend to make the fastest progress that I can on this undertaking.

We shall introduce primary legislation to give effect to the European Union data protection directive. We shall also make proposals on the funding of political parties.

The Government will work nationally and internationally to protect our citizens from terrorism and organised crime. We shall implement as quickly as possible the legislation enacted under the previous Administration in the Police Act.

We pledged in our manifesto to take proper ministerial responsibility for the Prison Service. That was before I had any anticipation that the debate might be a re-run of previous debates on the Prison Service. I have no plans to end the service's status as an agency within the Home Office, but I intend to examine the structure and organisation of the service and the Home Office's policy role, taking account of the conclusions of the director general's organisational review, which is already under way.

The reputation of the previous incumbent of my office was, in my judgment, deeply damaged by his refusal to accept proper responsibility for the Prison Service, and his arcane and unconvincing attempts to distinguish between policy and operations. As a first step to restoring proper ministerial responsibility, I have already announced that in future all parliamentary questions about the Prison Service will be answered by a Home Office Minister and not by the director general, who is a civil servant.

That is no reflection whatsoever on the director general, Richard Tilt, who has my full support. It will, however, put right what many right hon. and hon. Members have long regarded as bad practice. I regard it as essential that Ministers should answer personally to the House for what is done in our prisons and not leave the matter to their civil servants.

Our manifesto stated that we would establish an audit of the Prison Service, and arrangements for that are under way.

The Government will uphold firm controls on immigration, with applications being dealt with fairly and speedily. At the election, the then Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Huntingdon, refused to allow his party to be dragged down into debate about immigration policy. The then Prime Minister was correct to do so.

Our manifesto proposals in respect of the primary purpose rule are not about numbers but about fairness. Under the current bizarre arrangements, individuals

[Mr. Straw]

refused under the primary purpose rule are still allowed into the UK in the end, but only after years of expense and, often, humiliation.

An announcement about the changes that we propose will be made in due course. I can tell the House, however, that everyone who wishes to seek entry to the UK as a spouse or fiancée will continue to have to show that their marriage is genuine and that they will not be a burden on the state. We shall strongly reinforce those rules and also bring forward long-overdue proposals for the control of unscrupulous immigration advisers.

I take up the point raised by the hon. Member for Shrewsbury or Shropshire. Perhaps it is Stafford.

Mr. Cash: Stone.

Mr. Straw: I am sorry, the hon. Member for Stone (Mr. Cash). He moved, as it were, like every other Conservative who survived the election.

We have made it clear that we shall maintain Britain's frontier controls, including controls at the internal frontiers with other European Union states. Our commitment to that is clear and absolute, and it will be made even clearer at the intergovernmental conference negotiations in Amsterdam next week. It is time to put the issue of frontier controls beyond doubt.

I have left until last the Home Office Bill that is due to be introduced to the House first.

Mr. Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his appointment. Before he leaves immigration law, will he tell me what plans he has in government to end the routine imprisonment of asylum seekers in this country? Is he aware of the protests made by a number of asylum seekers who are currently held in prison in Birmingham? Is he prepared to examine their cases?

Mr. Straw: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his congratulations. Let us, however, start as we mean to go on. I share or agree only with the congratulations that he included in his intervention. We did not criticise the previous Administration for what my hon. Friend described as routine detentions of immigrants. About 1 per cent. of immigrants who are here unlawfully are the subject of detention. I am, of course, concerned to ensure that no individual who is required to leave this country is detained unnecessarily, but, as with prisoners, those who are detained for immigration purposes cannot be allowed to secure their own release by taking action, such as going on hunger strike. The prison and detention systems would break down if that were so.

I have left until last the Home Office Bill that is due to be introduced to this House first. The previous Government acted in the face of considerable opposition from its own side to tighten firearms controls following Dunblane. We supported those measures, but made it clear that we believed that they did not go far enough. We will, therefore, give Parliament the opportunity to vote on a total ban on handguns in general civilian use. A Bill will be introduced quickly. Labour Members will have a free vote. If Parliament supports a total ban, we will implement the necessary legislation as quickly as possible.

That is a substantial programme of action and legislation from a Government who will tackle crime and disorder, make people safer and help to build a better society. We shall encourage greater responsibility and, in doing so, seek to protect the rights of all.

Ours is an ambitious but attainable programme. Great good will and trust have been invested in this new Labour Government by the British people. That is a heavy responsibility, but it is a responsibility which we are proud to carry. We can and will make a difference to people's lives for the better. On that let us be judged.

4.41 pm

Miss Ann Widdecombe (Maidstone and The Weald): Madam Speaker, I am very grateful for the opportunity to speak in this debate, and for your advice that it will be in order for me to concentrate on events that occurred in the Home Office under the last Administration. If my remarks need a current context, they are made in the light of the necessity for the current Home Office Ministers to sort out their proper relationship with the Prison Service and other agencies.

Before embarking on my remarks, I should like to join in the tributes paid to Sir Michael Shersby, and in the congratulations to the Secretary of State for the Home Department, the right hon. Member for Blackburn (Mr. Straw) and the rest of his Front-Bench team. That is probably the nicest thing that I shall say to them for the rest of this Parliament.

I should say two things at the outset, because it is now generally known that what I have to say will be less than encouraging to my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard). First, I pay very great and very genuine tribute to his work at the Home Office. He put the protection of the public at the top of the agenda, and he kept it there. His term of office saw a fall in crime and a vast improvement in Her Majesty's prisons. He introduced a raft of measures to make Britain a more orderly place, and had the courage to make much-needed reforms to our widely abused asylum system.

It is therefore with genuine sadness and considerable reluctance, which I have had to overcome, that I turn to the rest of my remarks. But for my utter conviction of their rightness and of the imperative that lies behind them, I should not be making these remarks at all.

Secondly, although my remarks are informed by a number of documents and oral evidence, I shall not identify any individual document or any civil servants and Ministers whom I may quote. If ex-Ministers were to do that, government would become unworkable. However, if my right hon. and learned Friend hears me allude to things that he does not recognise, I will be happy afterwards to point out to him where the words occur.

It is urgently necessary for the House to restore its reputation with the nation. Many of our great institutions are falling into disrepute. I was wretchedly aware of how many people to whom I talked during the election uttered the sentiment that politicians of all parties are sleazy and corrupt, and principally concerned with their own interests and survival. That is an unjust and distorted picture, and does great disservice to the overwhelming majority of dedicated, honourable and hard-working Members of the House. It is regrettable that the House has been back only five minutes and already there is a corruption story—this time on the Labour Benches—all over our newspapers.

It should alarm us all that the House is now so comprehensively viewed as devoid of honour and a sense of service. In case there are smug looks on the faces of Labour Members, I have to say that the Labour party is ill placed to talk of principle when it changed its mind on policy three times a day merely to win an election. Whatever fun the public make of us, and no matter how upset the public may be by our decisions, it is still essential for there to be an underlying view that Members of the House are just, honourable and truthful. The higher the office, the greater that imperative.

Honourable treatment means that we treat those in our power justly, and that we do not reject from them defences that we regularly mount for ourselves. I profoundly regret that, in the previous Parliament, Ministers were criticised in independent reports and did not resign. I am not saying that they necessarily should have done, but if it is justice for them not to resign, it is also justice for our loyal servants not to resign.

If a party can go to the country and urge that its occasional disasters, however monumental, be overlooked on the basis of its otherwise truly magnificent achievements, it cannot, in honour, deny that same defence to individuals. Regularly to protect and excuse ourselves while visiting serious vengeance on others corrupts justice and demeans office.

Earlier, I alluded to the fact that there had been a great improvement in Her Majesty's prisons under the former Home Secretary. That improvement was the result of the efforts of two men: my right hon. and learned Friend and the former head of the Prison Service, Mr. Derek Lewis.

Mr. Lewis was an outstanding director general. He inherited an appalling and troubled service, which in 14 years we had not got right. Escapes took place daily, assaults were rife, industrial relations were chaotic and financial management poor. Under his vigorous leadership, escapes fell by a staggering 77 per cent.; overcrowding was reduced, despite a sharp rise in the number of prisoners; purposeful activity was increased by hundreds of thousands of hours, despite a reduction in costs per place; industrial relations were transformed; and the private finance initiative was so successfully run that it became a model for the rest of Whitehall.

The agency essentially met all targets set by Ministers, and new initiatives, such as reform to home leaves, drugs testing and the incentives and earned privileges regimes, were successfully implemented. All that was managed in the space of two and a half years.

There was still a great deal to be done—that is common ground—but it would have been unreasonable to expect everything to be achieved in the first 18 months, which is when the escape from Whitemoor occurred. After all—although I hesitate to point it out—we still had things to achieve after 18 years.

If people want a snapshot comparison of the Prison Service before Mr. Lewis came and when he left, they need only read the speech of the former Home Secretary, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke). He referred to the poor state of the Prison Service and correctly and courageously said that Ministers of all parties must take the blame. That speech, which was made in 1992 before the establishment of the agency, should be compared with the speech of my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe to the Prison Service conference in 1996—only

a few months after Mr. Lewis left—in which he praised to the skies the achievements of the service in the previous two years.

It was for those reasons that Ministers, very senior civil servants, the Prisons Board and its non-executives, urgently advised the then Home Secretary that he should not dismiss Mr. Lewis. It was for those reasons that two of the four non-executives resigned in protest, and that others chose other forms of making their views known. It was for those reasons that I nearly resigned, and now regret not doing so. I put that on the record: I now regret not doing so. If Mr. Lewis had been an indifferent director general, there would have been less achievement and certainly less support.

The Learmont report—which was used by the Home Secretary to dismiss Mr. Lewis—took no account of that progress; nor did it attempt to measure it, because that was not the general's brief. But, when—two months after Derek Lewis had left—the general was briefed to measure progress on implementation, this time on the Woodcock recommendations, he found:

"In the space of less than a year the Prison Service has made more headway than could reasonably have been expected".

Another report produced at that time found that Mr. Lewis had provided visible leadership, and reached other conclusions not compatible with the main Learmont report. One wonders what my right hon. and learned Friend would have made of it if he had had all three reports when reaching his conclusions. It is also worth recording that a previous report on the Whitemoor breakout had specifically exonerated Mr. Lewis of any negligence.

Before I end this section of my remarks, it is worth pointing out that there were serious flaws in the Learmont report in terms of approach and substantiation. I find its credibility severely dented by the fact that, when the general appeared before the Select Committee, it became obvious that he had no idea how escapes were measured and he admitted to simply missing a basic analysis of escape by categorisation of prisoner. Having made a large number of recommendations about Prison Service headquarters, he said that he had not visited the headquarters. The reason he gave was that he did not think that his team would be very welcome.

In a major report on security and organisation, that does not inspire me with confidence. My right hon. and learned Friend is very skilled forensically, and I cannot believe that he was taken in by the superficiality of some of the report. It is hard to conclude other than that the report was his pretext rather than his reason. There is evidence within the Home Office that he had wanted for a long time before that report was produced to remove Mr. Lewis from his post.

In his *Spectator* article, the former Home Secretary says that any chief executive of a private company who had received such a damning report would have been expected to resign. I say that any chief executive who had secured a 70 per cent. improvement in performance would in fact have received the highest rewards.

What did we actually achieve by the dismissal of Mr. Lewis? We had to pay him £220,000 in compensation, in return for which the taxpayer received nothing at all. We had to pay his costs, in the sum of £41,000, in return for which the taxpayer received nothing at all. We had to pay our own costs, in the

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sum of some £16,000. A most unnecessary bill of more than a quarter of a million pounds was the cost to the general public of my right hon. and learned Friend's decision.

We severely damaged relations with the private sector, as we found out when we considered the possibility of running an open competition for Mr. Lewis's job—a possibility from which we quickly retreated. We created a false distinction between policy and operations which has reverberated around the whole of Whitehall, not just the Home Office. We have endured swingeing headlines in the press, not least when the Home Office was ignominiously forced to consent to the judgment on the very day that the Conservative faithful were being rallied at the central council.

We left the Prison Service without a confirmed leader for five months, and we shattered its morale, just when things had been going well for 10 months. Manpower and time have been taken up by endless briefings and Select Committees—not just the Home Affairs Committee but the Public Service Committee—and the effects of the whole affair still rumble on.

And, for all that, did we eliminate disasters from the Prison Service? No. Only a few months later, approximately 541 prisoners were released before the end of their sentences. They did not even have to break out. The fact is that there were disasters in the service before Lewis—including high-profile escapes—disasters in the service during Lewis, and disasters in the service after Lewis; but, as the current director general—to whom I pay considerable tribute—has told the Home Affairs Select Committee, the real progress has been made since granting of agency status and that was due largely to the man who ran the agency at the time.

Quite apart from the merits of the case, the handling was deplorable—and personally witnessed by me—and was the cause of the distress that has now become public knowledge. The former director general was refused point blank on two occasions the opportunity to discuss the basis on which he was being dismissed. He had filed a large and detailed defence to the Learmont report, which was subsequently published, and even the former Home Secretary acknowledged that defence to be “persuasive and impressive”.

My right hon. and learned Friend decided, however, that it painted a different picture of the Prison Service from Learmont's, and that he preferred Learmont's. Mr. Lewis immediately said that the two pictures were compatible, but the Home Secretary would hear no argument on the point. I consider that an amazing act on the part of the head of a justice Department.

A dismissal meeting on the 15th lasted 20 minutes; a meeting on the 16th lasted 12 minutes, with, again, the former Home Secretary refusing to hear Mr. Lewis's defence. Although we had had the report on 27 September, a decision was not communicated to Mr. Lewis until 15 October, and he was then given six hours in which to resign. That was subsequently extended, and, in the meantime—although he had been asked to resign and to give notice and was therefore presumably still head of the service—he was not admitted to meetings, and not copied into documents then being prepared for the statement. It is not surprising that Mr. Lewis did not go quietly.

I might add that it was the minutes of those meetings that convinced me that minutes of meetings may be perfectly accurate without reflecting the tone and full content of the meetings. For example, there was a question of security audit which showed that the then Home Secretary believed that Mr. Lewis had set up security audits only after Whitemoor. In fact, they had been set up before Whitemoor, which suggests that Mr. Lewis did not need a disaster to see the importance of security. That exchange is not recorded.

It has often been said that Mr. Lewis was dismissed because, after Whitemoor, he failed to take action to prevent Parkhurst. One could be forgiven for believing that absolutely nothing was going on between the two events. In fact, the opposite is true.

Mr. Lewis had already put in hand additional cameras, alterations to fence height, infra-red screens, alarm-activated static cameras, installation of closed-visit facilities, new methods of recording intelligence, an increase in rub-down searches, routine searching of all staff and visitors, upgraded supervision of visits, the introduction of specialist arms and explosives search teams, local staff training, high-technology searching equipment, the introduction of personal alarms and volumetric control—but, of course, he did nothing in that couple of months.

We all know that, when Ministers come before the House, they sometimes give us coded messages. [Laughter.] These Ministers will do it, too. We know that, if a Minister appears before the House and says, “I have received an important report, and I will publish it shortly,” we may truly expect to find it in the Library shortly. If he says, “I will publish it as soon as possible,” we know that it will take quite a long time. If he says, “I will publish it in due course,” it is going to take a very long time indeed. But if he says, “This report has very serious implications which need very careful examination, and I will not be able to report to the House until that has happened,” that means, “By gum! I am leaving this one for my successor.”

My right hon. and learned Friend has a most exquisite way with words. On 16 October 1995, when presenting the Learmont report to Parliament, he told the House—hon. Members will find this in column 32 of *Hansard*—

“One particular aspect that I asked Sir John to consider was the extent to which visits should be closed. He recommends that there should be closed visits for exceptional risk category A prisoners other than in exceptional circumstances.

He told us:

“That coincides with the policy that I introduced in June this year.”—[*Official Report*, 16 October 1995; Vol.264, c.32.]

The use of the word “coincides” is intriguing. It is not unsustainable, but it is a bit curious, because no coincidence whatever was involved.

The Salmon version of the Learmont report specifically recommended that there should not be closed visits, even in SSUs. However, my right hon. and learned Friend subsequently wrote to General Learmont and stated in a very brief letter that he had decided that, when the SSU was opened at Whitemoor, closed visits would be implemented, whereupon the obliging general wrote back in five lines thanking him for that input, and stating that it would be reflected in his report.

The final version of the Learmont report totally reversed the original conclusion, and recommended closed visits. That says a great deal about the methodology of

the Learmont report, on which I have already commented, but it also causes me to raise my eyebrows a little at the choice of words that were used to the House.

When there was a decidedly embarrassing court settlement, a document was put in the Conservative Whips office for the use of Members. That suggests that Members could have used the information to deploy in the House. I think that, had they done so, they would have left themselves open to serious embarrassment.

That document was certainly not written personally by my right hon. and learned Friend: it was produced by Conservative central office. But it is inconceivable that it would have arrived in the Whips office if he had thought it inaccurate. That document told Members that the settlement is not an admission that Mr. Lewis was either wrongfully or unfairly dismissed. That statement is sustainable only on the utmost technicality.

I shall read to the House, because they have already been published, as has the foregoing Learmont exchange, by Mr. Lewis in his evidence to the Select Committee and are therefore in the public domain, the exact terms of our lawyer's letter, our having been told that we admit no wrongful dismissal. The letter states:

"For the avoidance of any possible remaining doubt I confirm that notwithstanding the Home Office is unable to admit terminating Mr. Lewis's contract in breach of contract due to the constitutional position of the Crown, it is accepted that, but for that position, your client's employment was terminated otherwise than in accordance with the terms of his contract. Accordingly, my client is willing to compensate Mr. Lewis upon the basis of damages for wrongful dismissal."

No wonder Mr. Lewis described our defence as

"a fig leaf so small as to be grossly indecent."

I shall now turn to the censure debate in October 1995. My right hon. and learned Friend said:

"On Tuesday, the Leader of the Opposition made three allegations:"

He went on to list them and said that the first one was

"that I personally told Mr. Lewis that the governor of Parkhurst should be suspended immediately;"

He listed the other allegations, and said:

"Each and every one of the allegations is untrue."—[*Official Report*, 19 October 1995; Vol. 264, c. 524.]

In other words, he categorically denied in the House that he had personally told Mr. Lewis that the governor of Parkhurst should be suspended immediately.

Some hon. Members may have watched "Newsnight" on Tuesday 13 May, in which my right hon. and learned Friend was far less categorical. He said of Mr. Lewis:

"I gave him the benefit of my opinion in strong language."

I can tell the House that the "Newsnight" version is the correct one.

There is ample documentary evidence that my right hon. and learned Friend did indeed personally tell Mr. Lewis that the governor of Parkhurst should be suspended. The atmosphere at that meeting, attested to in the documents, is of fury and confrontation. I was told in a personal note by one of those present:

"This was the subject of the worst disagreement. The Home Secretary wanted suspension, Derek Lewis adamantly refused."

Another document recorded:

"the discussion generated a lot more heat than light . . . and you made it clear that your preference was for suspension."

The warning that Derek Lewis has said that he received after he had been asked to reconsider his decision—that

"this is all getting white hot and I do not want it to become nuclear"—

is documented within the Department.

I say categorically to the House that the documents in the Department and the recollections of the civil servants and Ministers concerned show that Derek Lewis was told that the governor of Parkhurst should be suspended, and that he was told to take time to reconsider his decision when he refused. That is a very different picture from the one that was painted in the House on 19 October 1995, when all that my right hon. and learned Friend would admit to was wondering whether suspension might be more appropriate, and asking questions. I can only ask the House to imagine "white hot wondering" or "questions going nuclear" or "querying in strong language" consist of.

To tell Mr. Lewis that the governor of Parkhurst should be suspended is completely different from instructing Mr. Lewis. My right hon. and learned Friend has frequently said that he did not instruct Mr. Lewis—and he did not: there is common ground on that. However, he told him that the governor of Parkhurst should be suspended. The threat of instruction was distinct and was the second allegation, and we need to make sure that the two are disentangled.

The reason why the right hon. Member for Blackburn, now the Secretary of State for the Home Department, came to such grief in the debate on 19 October 1995 was that there was insufficient precision in using terms, and my right hon. and learned Friend is very precise in his terms. In the debate, my right hon. and learned Friend was asked by the hon. Member for Sunderland, South (Mr. Mullin):

"Mr. Lewis says that he was given a deadline by the right hon. and learned Gentleman by which to agree to the removal of Mr. Marriott, after which he would be overruled. Is that true?"

My right hon. and learned Friend replied categorically:

"There was no question of overruling the director general."—[*Official Report*, 19 October 1995; Vol. 264, c. 520.]

Oh, yes, there was. As he rather belatedly admitted last week, and as documentary evidence within the Department shows, after Mr. Lewis had been asked to reconsider his decision, my right hon. and learned Friend took advice on whether he could instruct Derek Lewis to suspend Mr. Marriott—this bearing in mind that he had told the House that he had not personally told Mr. Lewis that Marriott should be suspended.

But my right hon. and learned Friend was now carrying matters to the extent of seeking to instruct Mr. Lewis, and, after consultation with the Cabinet Office and legal advisers in the Department, he was advised that he could not instruct him. Therefore, it cannot be said that there was no question of overruling the director general. The question was asked, it was pursued, and it was answered in the negative.

In the October 1995 debate, my right hon. and learned Friend was asked whether Mr. Lewis had left the meeting to consider the deadline that the Secretary of State had set him to reconsider his decision. The former Home Secretary replied:

"I have no idea, at this distance in time, why he left the meeting."—[*Official Report*, 19 October 1995; Vol. 264, c. 521.]

[Miss Ann Widdecombe]

However, the day before, he had received an account of that meeting, which clearly showed that Mr. Lewis was asked when he left the meeting to "talk further" and "to think it through". I cannot believe that my right hon. and learned Friend's formidable memory should cause him to feel that 24 hours is a great distance in time.

In column 523 of the *Official Report*, my right hon. and learned Friend referred to minutes of the disputed meeting which he had placed in the Library. He told the House that the minutes were the detailed official account, and that he was doing his best to give the House a full account. But those minutes are not a full account. For example, they omit the very important fact that Mr. Lewis was invited to reconsider his decision. They are not the most detailed account. That would be the transcription of the private secretary's notebooks. The minutes are silent on matters that are well documented elsewhere.

There has also been some uncertainty about why the former governor of Parkhurst was moved from his post on the day that my right hon. and learned Friend made his statement, rather than within a few days, as the director general and operational director had intended. I have now seen detailed evidence that makes it clear that it was only a transcript of the words used by my right hon. and learned Friend to the House, which was transmitted to Parkhurst, which caused that change.

Hon. Members will note that there has been much interest in the press this week as to whether there was a direct threat from the former Home Secretary to the former director general that my right hon. and learned Friend would have to consider overruling him if, when he had reconsidered his decision, he did not come to a different view. We know that he was sent out to reconsider his decision. We know that, during that time, advice was taken on whether he could indeed be overruled. It is very strange that my right hon. and learned Friend refused to answer that question 14 times on "Newsnight" last week, and was so uncharacteristically tongue-tied that he could not explain, as he later claimed, that he was simply unsure about that element of such a traumatic disagreement, and needed to check the papers.

Although it was not debated in the House on 19 October, questions had been raised in that week as to whether the Home Secretary had threatened not only to overrule Mr. Lewis, but to sack him. This was 10 months before he was sacked. I can confirm that he did talk about sacking him that day, but not to Mr. Lewis himself. Mr. Lewis subsequently found out from a third party, but it shows the degree of ferocity that existed in that fateful meeting.

Therefore, the questions to my right hon. and learned Friend are these. Why did he say that he had not personally told Mr. Lewis that Mr. Marriott should be suspended immediately, when he had? Why did he say that there was no question of overruling Mr. Lewis, when the question had been pursued as far as consulting the Cabinet Office and legal advisers? Why did he say that he could not recall at that distance in time why Mr. Lewis had been asked to leave the meeting, when he had received only the previous day an account of that meeting, which showed that Mr. Lewis had been asked to reconsider his decision?

Why did my right hon. and learned Friend say that he was giving the House a full account, when he well knows that important issues that were discussed in the House were in fact omitted from the minutes that he laid before it as a full account? Will he now, to clear any doubt at all that may exist in the minds of hon. Members, ask the current Home Secretary to release the full transcript of the meeting, minus of course anything that might have involved security in our prisons?

I should say that, intriguingly, when I asked the Home Office whether I could have access to the document, it was denied, on the perfectly proper basis that I had not been involved in the meeting at the time. I then said, "Ah, but the document does then exist," and I was told, "Yes, but it might need some adjustment."

My right hon. and learned Friend has a problem, in that his first reaction to attack is denial and refuge in semantic prestidigitation. Why did he not simply come to the House on 19 October and say, "So what? Yes, I did tell the director general that Marriott should have been suspended. Yes, I did feel about it so strongly that I put huge pressure on him. Yes, I did tell him to reconsider his decision, and, yes, I did consider overruling him"? It was just too important not to consider it. Why on earth did he not say that, to what I have no doubt would have been high cheers from the then Government Benches? He could not do so because he had dug a hole for himself over policy and operations, and he would never have had to dig such a hole had he been prepared to keep the director general in place.

The issues before the House are not whether Marriott should have been suspended; I think that he should have been. They are not whether there was a smoking fax; the Opposition were confused. They are not about the precise form of words used in evidence to the Select Committee on the Marriott removal. It is purely statements made in the House on 19 October to which I am addressing myself. As a matter of fact, as I have said, I do believe that the former Home Secretary would have been right had he taken all those actions. It was simply that he told the House that they were not taken.

In the winding-up speech on 19 October 1995, I said that there was no doubt of the validity of the statements made to the Select Committee by the then Home Secretary and the then director general of the Prison Service, but, even as I stood at that Dispatch Box and spoke those words, I was starting to have very severe doubts about some of the statements that had been made in the House on that day.

Even so, for a long time, I could not be sure that actual words, as opposed to tone and impression, could be challenged. All manner of things made me determined to carry out the analysis that I have now carried out; and I regret that among those things was the treatment of Mr. Lewis after he left the Prison Service.

My right hon. and learned Friend has been defending himself this week against various statements that have come out—they have come from me, most of them. None of those defences has taken us much further forward. Asked why he refused 14 times on "Newsnight" to deny something that he had already categorically denied in the House, he said that he would have to check the record, but that seems, in the words of an article in *The Economist*, "a strange lapse for a high powered lawyer who had been challenged many times before on this precise point."

He then offered a defence in *The Spectator*, saying, significantly, that civil servants would have checked his account, and that they would have told him if it had been wrong.

I have two comments to make on that statement. The first is that it contains the familiar sound of looking for scapegoats. Can my right hon. and learned Friend really not take responsibility for what he said himself? Secondly, the question: supposing the civil servants had pointed out an inaccuracy, would he have rushed down to the House to correct it? He did not do so when he inadvertently—I stress that it was inadvertent—misled the House of Commons Select Committee over geophones.

In January 1995, my right hon. and learned Friend told the Select Committee on Home Affairs that money had not been switched from construction projects, including geophones, to building new house blocks. Indeed, he made the clear and unambiguous statement that additional money had been provided for the house blocks. Many months later, he was advised by his civil servants that that was wrong and he was also advised that statements that he had made in the House in connection with the timing of the decision to install geophones were also wrong. The issue was important, because the absence of geophones had been criticised by Sir John Larmont.

When I pointed out that no correction had been made, the former Home Secretary issued another of his statements. He said that he had sought immediate advice from Derek Lewis, who had advised that there was no practical significance to his answer, as funds were found for the geophones from other sources. Therefore, he advised the former Home Secretary that probably he had not misled the Committee, and the former Home Secretary takes refuge in that advice from Derek Lewis. It must be one of the few times that he was grateful for advice from Derek Lewis.

My right hon. and learned Friend omits to point out that, in two succeeding memoranda, his own Prison Service monitoring unit stuck to its guns and said that the statements were misleading; that they did not consist of a full account, which Ministers are obliged to give under "Questions of Procedure for Ministers"; and that, had officials given such information, they would have been obliged to correct it.

But no correction was ever made, despite the fact that an ideal opportunity was presented when the Larmont report was published. A very bland, all-encompassing statement could then have been made, to the effect that the detailed analysis replaced all previous information and corrected any previous information inadvertently wrongly given.

My right hon. and learned Friend has made much of how he is the one to take tough decisions. Tough decisions concern a great deal more than instant law and instant dismissals. The toughest decision of all that he would have had to take was to come to the House on 16 October, told it that a damning report had been received, but that half its recommendations had already been implemented or were actively being put in hand; that the progress of the Prison Service under the director general was of such outstanding quality that he was continuing, with my right hon. and learned Friend's personal support; and that he, the Home Secretary, also had no intention of resigning, because there was no direct connection between himself and what had happened.

That would have been tough, because the then Opposition would have howled for a head, and, if they were not given Mr. Lewis's, they might have howled for that of my right hon. and learned Friend, but we had a majority, so there was no reason to suppose that they would get it. However, he had been through that terrible sort of confrontation in the House in January, immediately after the Parkhurst breakout, and he was not quite tough enough to face it again in October.

Courage and toughness are both more than instant law and instant dismissal. We demean our high office if we mistreat our public servants. As hon. Members, we demean ourselves if we come to the House to indulge in a play of words and make statements which, although they may not be untrue—they never are in the House—may be unsustainable.

My decision to do what I have done today was extremely difficult to reach, and I have agonised over it for months. One of the worst moments was when I decided that I would do it. I knew how shocked, hurt and upset not only my right hon. and learned Friend but many of my colleagues would be, but I formed the view that I could do no other. I reached my decision in the interests of giving very belated justice to Mr. Lewis, of giving some comfort to his wife Louise—who supported him faithfully while he gave us seven days a week looking after the Prison Service—partly of clearing my own conscience, although that is my problem, because I should have resigned at the time and did not—[HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] Yes, I agree.

I reached that view also to draw to the attention of the House the overwhelming necessity for the Leader of the Opposition—whoever he will be—and the new Prime Minister to clean up Parliament's image in the eyes of the British people. It is not enough to preserve our own positions at all costs. When we occupy high positions, and certainly when we occupy such positions in justice Departments, justice must be our first concern.

I am aware that I probably will not be forgiven for my decision by some Conservative Members until the day I leave Parliament. If I had not done what I have done today, however, I would not have forgiven myself until I left Parliament and beyond.

Mr. Michael Howard (Folkestone and Hythe): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. I shall respond in detail to the allegations made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) when I reply to this debate. I respond immediately, however, to her invitation to ask the Home Secretary to release the full transcript of the meeting to which she has referred, in the hope that it can be made available in time for my speech later today.

Madam Speaker: That is not a point of order for me.

5.21 pm

Mr. Denzil Davies (Llanelli): I am sure that the House and the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) will understand if I do not attempt to follow her remarks.

I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary on his appointment and on his excellent first speech as Home Secretary. Like most of my right hon. and hon. Friends who have spoken in this debate on the Loyal

[*Mr. Denzil Davies*]

Address, I welcome both the tone and most, if not all, of the content of the Queen's Speech. I welcome my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary's remarks and the Government's proposals on law and order, as I do those on health and education.

I especially welcome the windfall tax proposal. If it is successful—I am sure it will be—it will impinge upon and help with law and order problems. During the past 18 years, in my constituency, as in most others, one of the greatest scourges has been youth unemployment, particularly among young men. I hope that the windfall tax and its attendant measures will do something to alleviate such unemployment, which has caused misery to those unemployed men and women, worry to their parents, and serious economic and social consequences for the community.

My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary mentioned the drug problem, which is complex and has often had disastrous consequences. The causes of the problem may not be easy to determine, although, in my constituency—which, in terms of the drug problem, is no different from other—there was only a very minor, if any, drug problem in 1979, when the previous Labour Government left office.

One consequence for candidates and for the electorate—I will not say that it was necessarily a benefit—of a six-week election campaign, during which there was almost constantly good weather, was that we saw a lot of each other. We probably saw more of each other than we did during the previous seven general election campaigns that I have fought, and I met more electors and constituents than ever before. I usually found—as the election results showed—that my constituents welcomed Labour's proposals on law and order, health, education and the windfall tax.

There was, however, one group of electors—who are now constituents—who were very angry: pensioners. For the first time in the eight general elections that I have contested, in a traditional Labour constituency, I did not detect an enthusiastic welcome from pensioners for the Labour party's policies or for its candidate for Llanelli. They were angry and frustrated primarily because, in 1979 or 1980, the Conservative Government broke the link between pensions and wages, which had been introduced by a previous Labour Government. That was the root cause of their anger, after someone had calculated that pensioners had lost at least £18 a week because that link had been broken.

I told the pensioners that it would be difficult, if not impossible, to reverse the actions of the past 18 years, and they grudgingly accepted that. Then they asked, "But what will you do?" I started with our proposals on decreasing VAT on fuel; again they grudgingly accepted my answer. I went on to say that pensioners would be helped by Labour's proposals on law and order, on health and on other social issues, as mentioned in our manifesto. They again expressed a grudging acceptance of my answer.

I was still not able to escape, however, because they asked me about television licences. They asked, "Why should we pay £87 a year when other pensioners pay nothing?" They did not criticise that exemption, but they asked, "Why should we, who have very little

entertainment available, pay an exorbitant sum for a television licence?" I did not want to tell them that the chattering classes at the BBC had to be kept in the style to which they have become accustomed, because that might have been pushing my luck a bit far. I had no answer for them.

When I thought that I could perhaps make an escape, they hit me with a question on the Republic of Ireland—because west Wales has suddenly discovered Ireland. West Wales, if not all of Wales, has discovered that the average gross domestic product per head in Ireland is now as high as it is in the United Kingdom—and that it is much higher than it is in Wales. I was told—I could not refute it, because I did not know the figures—that pensions in the Republic of Ireland are higher than in Britain, that Ireland's television licence fee is much lower, and that pensioners can travel free throughout the island of Ireland.

My confrontations—sadly, that is what the meetings became—with pensioners in my constituency were not very productive for me or for the Labour party. After reflecting on the general election and thinking about it, however, I have concluded that the only way in which we can eventually—not tomorrow, but soon—deal with the matter is to consider increasing the basic rate of the old age pension. I see no other solution. The introduction of price differentials in television licences would probably be too difficult, and travel is often a matter for local authorities, but we should consider increasing the basic pension by perhaps £5 a week for a single person and £8 a week for a married couple.

I do not criticise my right hon. and hon. Friends for not including such a step in the Queen's Speech. I shall not criticise them if it does not appear in the next Budget—it will not—because I am told that the cost of such a proposal, taking into account the need to uprate income support and the effect on the Exchequer, is probably around £2 billion. However, we say in the Queen's Speech that we are a party of one nation. The speech deals with young people, law and order and the health service, so I hope that, over the next year, we can consider the injustice that has been done to pensioners and, somehow or other, find the £2 billion to put it right before too long.

As I said, I welcome the Queen's Speech but, sadly, I have one reservation. It involves the proposal to transfer the power to control and set the price of money and to set interest rates from the Treasury—and, basically, from the House—to the Bank of England.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. I am sorry to interrupt the right hon. Gentleman, but we are now debating the amendment. I hope that he will steer his remarks in that direction.

Mr. Davies: I apologise; I was under the impression that we were debating the Queen's Speech in general. The amendment may have been moved, but I did not think that we were precluded from debating topics not mentioned in it—that has certainly not been the practice in the past.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: As I understand it, once the amendment has been moved, the debate should concentrate on its contents. However, I have given the

right hon. Gentleman some leeway. I hope that he will accept what I have said in the spirit in which it was intended.

Mr. Davies: In that case, I shall continue to deal with the question of parliamentary responsibility with which my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary dealt when he mentioned the Prison Service. Indeed, the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald dealt with parliamentary responsibility—she said that it had not been exercised in relation to the Prison Service. My remarks on the Bank of England deal with what I should think is the overriding issue of parliamentary responsibility. However, I defer to the occupant of the Chair. If I am out of order, I shall draw my remarks to a close, but I repeat that the transfer of power to the Bank of England is a transfer of democracy, just as the transfer of some power to the prison authorities was a transfer of democracy. The point is that such a transfer leads to all kinds of problems, as the right hon. Lady said.

I support the Queen's Speech. My right hon. Friends have made an excellent start, with the exception of the transfer of power to the Bank of England. However, we shall debate the matter again when we consider the relevant legislation. I am sure that the government of the country is in good hands.

5.33 pm

Mr. A. J. Beith (Berwick-upon-Tweed): I congratulate you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, on your election to your new office. I had intended to congratulate the Home Secretary on his appointment, but, as he has already fled the scene, I shall save my congratulations for another occasion. Perhaps he has gone for a rummage in the archives, but he will quickly discover that he does not have access to the records of the previous Administration.

The debate has taken an intriguing turn. It must especially intrigue my many newly elected colleagues, not to mention many new Labour Members of Parliament, because it has shown that there are two Conservative parties. We heard initially from what we must assume is the moderately pro-Howard Conservative party, which speaks from the Front Bench—at least when it is in the form of the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean). We then heard from the anti-Howard party in the form of the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) who in fact extended the debate of 19 October last by saying various things that she ought to have said then, and which she should have said from the Back Benches rather than the Front Bench.

I am sorry that the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald has left the Chamber so soon after making her speech, because there are several questions to be put to her. I wonder whether she communicated the full extent of her concerns to the Prime Minister at the time. Was he made aware of them? He certainly ought to have been. If he was, but did nothing about the situation, it suggests that the Government were as little under control as many of us came to believe in the course of their last few years.

I can now congratulate the Home Secretary, who has returned to the Chamber. I wish him well in his important and demanding office of state—few are more demanding, and I genuinely wish him well.

I do not think that I need to have given any notice to the former Home Secretary that I intended to refer to him in this debate. Indeed, everyone is expecting the debate to

turn to a considerable extent on the previous Home Secretary. I have a number of things to say about him. He failed to keep the promise to increase police numbers that the Conservative Government made in 1992. He distorted and debased the debate on prisons and punishment. The country was treated to tabloid and soundbite penal policy, which was extremely damaging to any reasonable debate on how crime can be reduced. The test to earn the approval of the Home Secretary depended on how many people one was prepared to lock up.

The former Home Secretary demoralised the prison service, and the full extent of that was illustrated by the remarks of the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald. He also seriously undermined parliamentary accountability, especially in relation to the Prison Service. He sought to draw a distinction between policy and operations, which is difficult to do in the Prison Service. However, if there is a distinction, the right hon. and learned Gentleman was no more capable of abiding by it than a drunken man is able to walk along the straight line that used to be drawn on the police station floor.

The right hon. and learned Gentleman was temperamentally incapable of observing a distinction between policy and operations and intervened in all manner of things. Had he been more open about his intentions, he could have defended them. They were all based on his very firm conviction that he was right and that suspension of this governor, the changing of that salary structure or the alteration of that prisoner's term were all matters in which he should properly intervene. However, once questions were asked, the matter became a matter of operations, nothing to do with policy and not something to which he should refer when answering to the House. He is now getting his come-uppance as the Conservative party splits into two. The second of those parties was represented here this afternoon by the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald.

I have to say to the new Home Secretary—some of his friends as well as his political opponents will have said this to him, too—that he was a consenting participant in the tabloid competition to sound tough in the period before the general election. Some of his sympathisers think it was all a deception. Polly Toynbee, most notably, writes in the press that we do not have to believe what the then shadow Home Secretary said because it will change when he gets into office. I, however, take him to be a more sincere and honest man than that. The worry that arises from my belief in his sincerity is that he accepts much of the tough talk about prison working in which he participated before the election. He now has to face the challenge, especially in connection with prison policy and policing.

Our prisons are already appallingly overcrowded. The prison population has risen by 15,000 in three years; the number of women prisoners has gone up by two thirds over the same period; and 86 per cent. of people in prison are there for non-violent offences. So serious are the dangers of overcrowding, following, as they do, an attempt to find a more humane pattern to prisons, that the Home Secretary now has to visit prison ships moored off Dorset and consider whether holiday camps should be brought into use. Before long, he will have to consider whether police cells are to be used to house prisoners, which would be not only an unsatisfactory way to house them but a waste of police time. We must not take that step if we are to continue our serious attack on crime.

[Mr. A. J. Beith]

Using police cells and police time and resources to deal with the custody of prisoners is the very opposite of an attack on crime.

I should like to refer to a couple of recent reports to the Home Secretary from boards of prison visitors. The report on Swaleside prison published in April says:

"Education is still a major area for concern as it was last year. Privatisation has produced less prisoners being educated for more money . . .

The closure of some work shops and the cut back and deterioration in the Education Department has created a situation where during 1996 more and more prisoners spent 19/20 hours locked in cells."

The press release accompanying the board of visitors report on Wandsworth prison in April says:

"The Report complains about the reduction in the number of staff and services caused by budget cuts. One part of the prison which houses sex offenders has had its staff cut from 70 to 50, the Probation Department has had its numbers cut from 14 to three and the number of classes run by the Education Department has been halved."

I should add for fairness that the press release continues:

"On the positive side, however, the Report commends the prison's Drug Strategy and the refurbishment of A and B Wings—two Victorian 'slopping out' wings—which were only recently closed and which the Home Office had threatened to re-open if overcrowding demanded."

If overcrowding continues, we shall have to reopen wings that have not been adequately refurbished.

All that poses an even more serious question for the new Home Secretary. We must know not just what he will do about the effects of the recent trend in prison numbers, but whether he is serious about implementing the Crime (Sentences) Act 1997, passed just a month or so ago. If he is serious, we shall need not just the eight new prisons already planned, but a further 12, 20 or, according to some unpublished Home Office figures, even 60 new prisons.

Significantly, the Home Secretary said this afternoon that he would not be prepared to implement the measures if the prison places were not available. That must mean a significant change in the timetable for implementation set out by the previous Home Secretary. Even if the timetable is changed, it will require a huge diversion of resources into prison building.

Is the new Home Secretary converted to the building of private prisons? All the estimates so far made for building prisons to meet the provisions of the Crime (Sentences) Act 1997 are based on the assumption that they will all be private prisons. On that assumption, there will be no immediate capital cost to the Exchequer, merely the payment of revenue costs to private providers of prisons. Is that new Labour's policy? It cannot be squared with what Labour said before the election. I do not believe that the new Home Secretary will be able to implement the Act. I think that he will gradually slide away from the commitment that he made in the heat of the election campaign. Even his repetition of it today was heavily qualified.

Another severe challenge to the Home Secretary is what he intends to do about police numbers. Nothing in his speech or, to be fair, in Labour's manifesto, suggests an increase in police numbers. He sought to defend that today by pointing out that the decision on how money is used rests with chief constables. I do not think that that

was the only reason for there being nothing on the subject in the manifesto. I think that the Home Secretary did not want to make a promise that he had not made provision to keep by setting aside additional funds. Unless police authorities get additional funds, we shall not get additional police officers.

Many police authorities have reorganised their resources as effectively as they can, cutting out management structures to release more officers to put on the beat. There is not much slack left in many forces. Getting more officers on the beat will need additional resources that are not already pre-empted for new equipment or other essential expenditure to which the Home Secretary referred.

The story does not end there. The Home Secretary wants to introduce new responsibilities for the police. He is inviting them to engage in zero tolerance campaigns in some areas. That requires additional resources, unless the rest of the police authority area is to be seriously denuded. We had some experience of that in Northumbria, with all the Meadowell problems and the concentration of resources in one area.

The Liberal Democrats have some anxieties about the concept of zero-tolerance. We do not want to encourage the use of the phrase, which implies a social authoritarianism that does not seem right to us in a free society. I hope that the Home Secretary means not such social authoritarianism, but that rigorous enforcement of the law will ensure that the extent to which an area is law abiding will be vigorously improved in ways that the public would welcome, although some senior police officers have already expressed doubts about how manageable the consequences of some of the more aggressive zero tolerance campaigns might be.

Even if the campaigns meet all our criteria, they require more resources and more officers. If those resources are to be taken from other parts of a police authority area, the net effect will probably be an overall increase in crime, with one area being helped, but others suffering.

Other new responsibilities are proposed. If there are to be general child curfews, police officers will have to stop and question young children they see about at night. We are not convinced that that is a good scheme. Police officers are already able to use their common sense and stop and question children who are too young to be wandering around late at night. If they are to be pressed to organise curfews, more police resources will be needed.

We would place the emphasis in dealing with crime on having more police officers available in communities and on a range of crime prevention measures, including diverting young people from crime and confronting offending behaviour. Such measures are more likely to be effective than the massive diversion into custody implicit in the plans that the Government have inherited and seem willing to continue.

As we have said for many years, the drugs problem lies behind much crime. When the Home Secretary was quoted the other day as being surprised by the scale of the problem, someone said to me, "Where has he been?" The fact that a lot of crime arises from feeding the drugs habit is well known. When new Labour brings us a tsar, we see how much the political tables have been turned. Tsars used to be people who were murdered by communists. Now they are people whom new Labour

wishes to appoint. The responsibilities and powers of someone with such a grand title have not been vouchsafed to us.

We want serious research into the problem, and consideration of drugs policy away from the political atmosphere of the last Parliament and the general election, in which any suggestion of significant variation on present policy was regarded as a weakening. None of the parties has all the answers and there is uncertainty about the effects of policies. There is considerable difference of view among professionals. We want serious research, hard-headed debate and Government backing nationally and locally for co-ordinated strategies to deal with drugs problems. Measures that look simple and attractive can easily go wrong. Mandatory drug testing in prisons seems a wonderful idea until we discover that it encourages people to shift from cannabis to harder drugs because the harder drugs are more difficult to pick up under the mandatory testing programme. We should beware simple solutions.

The Home Secretary will also face challenges on other issues. We shall challenge him on some of the issues not covered in the Gracious Speech. Legislation is desperately needed to regulate the private security industry. Such measures would be welcomed in many parts of the House, and the police would like such legislation in place soon.

We welcome some of what the Home Secretary has said on immigration and asylum policy, but we are not yet convinced that he will do enough to deal with the problem of families being divided by the harsh application of immigration law. We await his further announcements with particular interest.

We shall look carefully at the Home Secretary's plans to speed up the youth justice system and to deal with anti-social behaviour. We very much welcome his commitment to bring the European convention on human rights into British domestic law. I took a Bill through the House on that subject about 15 or 20 years ago. Some conversions take a long time. In those days, the idea was bitterly opposed by Labour, but I genuinely welcome the Home Secretary's stance. We hope to assist on that. We also welcome what he has said about legislation on racial attacks and racial harassment.

The handguns issue will remain a free vote issue for my right hon. and hon. Friends, as it was in the last Parliament, although the Home Secretary may find my party working together to press him on compensation. If he creates a new compensation requirement, we shall seek, as we did on the previous legislation, to ensure that those who are affected by legislation that is in no way their fault have proper compensation provision.

We shall oppose the amendment tabled by the official Opposition. We do not want a return to the measures set out there.

Of all Departments, the work of the Home Office most closely involves the protection of civil liberties. I include the liberty that requires people to be protected from crime, as well as the other areas of civil liberty. Many people think that civil liberties did not feature highly on new Labour's agenda as it sought power. The rhetoric that Labour used suggested that that was the case, but now we shall see.

Up to the very last days of the last Parliament—when we blocked some measures to which the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border referred—the Liberal Democrats served as guardians of liberty. We will continue to do so; that is one of the reasons we are here.

5.49 pm

Mr. Tom Cox (Tooting): The interesting speech by the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) will, I am sure, be alluded to by other hon. Members. I listened with interest to the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith); I agreed with many of his comments and intend to touch on some.

During the election campaign, the one thing about which we heard day after day was the fear of crime. It did not matter whether one talked to men or women, or what age they were—crime in the community was the key issue. In my constituency, people were concerned about the amount of youth crime and the type of crime in which young people are now involved—hooliganism, vandalism, abuse and violence. People in my constituency are terrorised by gangs of youngsters—often just school children—and I am sure that other communities suffer that problem.

Local people are often scared to do anything about the abuse that they suffer. If one complains to the police and the youngsters are taken to court, one may have to give evidence—even when it is known which youngsters are involved. There is a fear that a person giving evidence will identify himself and will suffer following the decision of the court. It is totally unacceptable that our constituents can be terrorised in that way.

I welcome the comments of my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary this afternoon. When the Bills to which he referred go into Committee and start to gain publicity, we must make it clear that we will no longer tolerate abuse and violence. All of us will warmly welcome such a statement.

I wish to refer to two cases that, sadly, highlight what is happening. I have no intention of indulging in party politics, because we are dealing with gut issues which concern the people whom we represent. The first is the horrendous case of an Austrian lady who came to London and was picked up by a gang of youngsters who brutally gang-raped her. When she gave evidence in court, she said that she had no fear when she was first approached, as the gang were just youngsters. Yet they raped her and threw her into the river. They were prepared to allow her to drown; they had no idea whether she could swim.

The other case, which was reported in a national newspaper last Friday, is that of a school bullying ring of 10 boys aged between 13 and 15 who have been robbing and blackmailing other children for some eight months. Those are two examples, and I am sure that other hon. Members could give many similar ones from the areas that they represent. We know what kind of crimes are taking place, and I hope that we can develop penalties that the courts will be expected to impose on those who break the law.

Many of us have constituency problems. In my constituency—although this problem has been almost overcome—kerb crawling and prostitution have caused enormous difficulties. One of the biggest problems has been getting local magistrates courts to understand what is happening. Sadly, the lack of meaningful action by the

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courts against those committing the offences has broken down the effects of much of the hard work of the local police force in trying to clear up the problem.

I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary will have no fear: if his actions are fair and realistic, he will gain the overwhelming support of the House and—more important—of the people.

Mr. Rowe: The hon. Gentleman is making important points. Does he agree that all of us—not only in this place, but in our circles of friends—should support magistrates, rather than constantly belittling them? Is not one of the real difficulties that often these public servants—who voluntarily give up hours of their time—are out of touch with some elements of the scene in which they operate? Unless they are supported rather than belittled, will it not be hard to recruit magistrates?

Mr. Cox: I take the point that the hon. Gentleman makes. We should not criticise magistrates, although my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary referred to the inconsistencies in sentencing that we see repeatedly. That may mean that magistrates should attend courses or conferences. Whenever I have tabled questions on the matter to numerous Home Secretaries, I have always been told that it is not for the Government to interfere with the judiciary. That may be, but the judiciary needs clear guidelines.

I recognise that many hon. Members wish to speak, and I shall turn briefly to the Prison Service. One of the major prisons in the country, Wandsworth, is in my constituency and I serve on the board at Wormwood Scrubs. We heard some interesting remarks on the subject by the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald, and those involved with the Prison Service know that enormous changes have taken place. If one talks to those who run our prisons—governors, prison officers or boards of visitors—one finds that they have little time for many of the changes that were introduced by the previous Government.

I am closely involved with Wandsworth prison, its governor and the Prison Officers Association. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has inherited a Prison Service which has enormous problems, and it is no good Conservative Members saying that the Government have inherited a wonderful Prison Service. That is not true. Prisons up and down the country are seriously overcrowded and are not properly funded. Morale—which I believe is of key importance in prisons—is very low.

I realise that some of the things I am about to suggest will not be done quickly, but as long as we have guidelines for which we can aim and as long as those who run the Prison Service can see that here is a Government who will listen to their concerns and act on them, morale in the Prison Service will improve. I hope that action will be taken to reduce the prison population. One reads in the national press that certain actions are to be taken by my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary, for example, in relation to fine defaulters. I am sure that many Labour Members have felt it scandalous that fine defaulters—often women with young children—should be sent to prison, with all the problems that that creates.

There are many people in prison—certainly there have been since the failures of care in the community—who suffer from mental illness and who, sadly, find their way

into the prisons of this country but most certainly should not be there. I hope that we will seriously look for alternative forms of care for such people.

I fully accept that there are some very dangerous people in society—people who are convicted of horrendous crimes and who should be sent to prison for a long time—but what do we achieve by sending them to prison for only a short time? Governors and prison officers will say that they are only containing such an individual for a period, but that that individual is learning nothing of benefit for when he or she is released at the end of the sentence.

It costs more than £500 a week to keep a man or woman in prison. In view of the financial tightness that we know exists, we have to wonder whether that is the proper way in which the Prison Service should be run. We need to review how we run our prisons. If one talks to anyone working within the system, one hears of the despair about trying to do a meaningful job as a governor or prison officer while many of the inmates in their charge are locked up for hours on end, day after day.

The right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed mentioned two reports, one of which was the Wandsworth prison board of visitors annual report. Following an abortive inspection of Holloway prison—an inspection was to have taken place in December 1995—the chief inspector of prisons, Sir David Ramsbotham, said:

"I had to pull an inspection team out of Holloway women's prison in London. An unprecedented move, it was the quickest and most effective way of registering our horror at what we found there."

In all my 36 years in the Army, until I left in 1993 with the rank of Adjutant-General, I had never visited an establishment as filthy as that one—and that includes a prisoner-of-war camp in the Falkland Islands. There was ample evidence in Holloway of rats, cockroaches, ants and rotting food. It was difficult to argue with the warder who described the place as a 'rat-infested refuse tip'.

Worst of all, the inmates were locked up in their cells for 23 hours a day. There was no work, no training, no education. All in all, Holloway had become an almost perfect example of everything that a modern prison is not meant to be."

I am sure that what the chief inspector of prisons said could be repeated by many prison governors and senior prison officers up and down the country.

I hope that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary and his colleagues will start to take note of what the chief inspector of prisons says. I hope that we are to hear—if not today, then soon—how my right hon. Friend envisages the role of the chief inspector. I hope that the relationship will be supportive and that not only the chief inspector's reports but those of boards of visitors will be welcomed and acted on. The men and women on those boards give up an enormous amount of their time and know what is really happening in the prisons in which they serve, so their reports should not be received, acknowledged and then conveniently forgotten.

When I visit prisons, I am greatly concerned by the number of young inmates and, sadly, in the big city establishments, the number of young inmates who come from an ethnic background. I believe we have to take serious action in many of our big cities to try to keep such youngsters—both men and women—out of the prison system. Once they get into that system, it is very hard to break out. I hope that we will hear more on that subject in the coming weeks from my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary.

My right hon. Friend and his colleagues will be aware of my next point, but I feel that it should be made clear in a debate such as this. When I meet prison officers, I hear that the one policy that has not worked is the privatisation of the Prison Service. It has not worked and countless examples of that failure can be found up and down the country. I hope that we will soon hear that we shall no longer continue with the policy of the privatisation of the Prison Service in any part of the United Kingdom. I want to see a Prison Service that is the responsibility of the state and whose day-to-day operations are accountable to Parliament.

I know that my right hon. Friend said that, in future, all questions relating to prison matters will be answered by Ministers, and I welcome that. Since the privatisation of the Prison Service, the complaint has been raised that privatised prisons no longer have any responsibility to Parliament. The policy absolves the Government from any responsibility whatsoever and I totally oppose that. The very nature of the Prison Service means that it should be accountable to Parliament and I hope that that will happen in the near future.

It is rare that we have debates about the Prison Service in the House, but I hope that in coming weeks there will be a major day-long debate on the service. There are many issues relating to prisons that should be debated: for example, the way in which prisons are run; the sort of inmates they hold; vulnerable prisoners and the suicides that have occurred in increasing numbers, particularly among young offenders; and how we intend to treat young offenders.

I am sure that all hon. Members, but especially those who sit on the Government Benches, hope that, at long last, those who run our prisons—be they governors, senior prison officers or rank-and-file officers—can believe that they have a Government who will listen to them. I have been told by officers at Wandsworth prison in my constituency that they believe that the Government will start to act on the experience that they have built up by doing the job. If my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary and his team adopt such a policy, it can only be for the betterment of the Prison Service and thus for the betterment of this country.

6.9 pm

Mr. Ken Maginnis (Fermanagh and South Tyrone): On behalf of the Ulster Unionist party, I welcome the new Home Secretary and the other Ministers of the Home Office to the Dispatch Box. I must also thank the former Home Secretary for the interest, understanding and courtesy that he has always shown my party.

The new Home Secretary will find that we have many ideas and attitudes in common with those that he has expressed, and we wish him well. Already, his attitude to one of the main causes of fear and suffering throughout the nation—the scourge of drug abuse—has struck a chord.

There are three areas in which the Home Secretary must seek to make an impact: the home, schools and the press. He will need to show equal commitment to the two primary resources that can be used to reverse the current trend: education and punishment.

On the education front, we want the Home Secretary to co-ordinate, among schools, police, sporting authorities, business institutes, trade unions and every facet of

representative life, an anti-drugs programme that will reach effectively to every corner of the kingdom—and that includes Northern Ireland.

On the justice side, the Home Secretary must ensure that those in whom we vest responsibility to protect us from criminal degradation are conscious of their primary responsibility to the law-abiding community. When it comes to tackling the godfathers of crime, it is time to adopt more of a “throw away the key” philosophy. The rewards of criminality for the big boys far outweigh the punishments; that must change.

My party believes that parents have a responsibility for their children. It must be made clear, therefore, that society expects a positive response from parents when it comes to accounting for misdemeanours committed by their children. There must be a properly defined accounting system, so that neither persistent young offenders nor persistently negligent parents can for ever evade their debt to society.

As a schoolmaster of 23 years’ service—16 as a principal—I must now say something that may not go down too well with some. There is in my profession a small but significant element who no longer fulfil the “role model” criteria that society requires of them. They are slovenly in dress, speech and attitude. They, and similar-small, but significant, elements of the social work and probationary services, must be encouraged to meet their obligations or—to put it bluntly—get out.

Of course there is an onus on the Government to ensure that those who perform well are given fair recognition for the demanding job that they do. They must be reassured that they have the moral support of the community and the tangible support of the present Administration.

I hope that the Home Secretary will seek to build a better and safer environment, not least for the young and the elderly. In that, I urge him to seek, and I believe that he has the right to expect, the co-operation of our press and television, which too often appear to indulge in pandering to the lowest instincts of society.

It is time for all to put the interests of victims above those of the criminal. The time for potty pseudo-liberalism is long past and the present Government must show that they are more concerned with bleeding victims than with so-called “bleeding hearts”.

Before I move to an issue that more specifically relates to Northern Ireland, may I ask the Home Secretary whether there is any specific law to cope with bullying in schools and the workplace? I have been advised by a victims of bullying group that there is not, and that one must prove physical or serious psychological injury to obtain redress. If that is so, will the Home Secretary address the issue of bullying? Emotional scars that the victims suffer and the power fixation that the perpetrators acquire do nothing to promote a stable society. Both victims and perpetrators are in danger of finishing up with a badly warped view of life.

Turning to Northern Ireland, there are several matters on which the Home Secretary, although not having primary responsibility, will be consulted by his colleague, the right hon. Member for Redcar (Marjorie Mowlam). I hope that the Home Secretary will familiarise himself at first hand with Northern Ireland affairs.

That which most immediately exercises our thoughts is the comparatively new phenomenon that has arisen as a result of a Sinn Féin-IRA tactic to orchestrate opposition

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to traditional parades. No Member on the Ulster Unionist Bench would assert that every parade that occurs in Northern Ireland is conceived in innocence, but established parades of the Ancient Order of Hibernians, the Apprentice Boys of Derry, the Irish National Foresters, the Orange Order and the Royal Black Institution are certainly not designed to give offence.

Now, after more than 25 years of IRA murders by the very people who whinge that their exclusion from this place is unfair, we find that so deep is their hatred of anything Unionist or Protestant that they object to the very sight of their Protestant neighbour walking to and from his church along a public highway.

Despite the fact that article 11 of the European convention on human rights states:

"Everyone has the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and to freedom of association with others, including the right to form and to join trade unions for the protection of his interests"

and that article 21 of the international covenant on civil and political rights states:

"The right to peaceful assembly shall be recognised. No restrictions may be placed on the exercise of this right other than those imposed in conformity with the law and which are necessary in a democratic society in the interest of national security or public safety, public order, the protection of health or morals or the protection of the human rights and freedoms of others",

the threat of violence by IRA-Sinn Féin-motivated mobs has been deemed sufficient cause to ban parades. We find that main arterial routes, such as the Ormeau road and Garvaghy road, are being designated "Roman Catholic". Main roads with sectarian affiliations—what next?

Evading his responsibility in 1996, the former Secretary of State for Northern Ireland set up the North commission, basically to decide how it would be possible to compromise—compromise—with threat, intimidation and bigotry. The new Secretary of State for Northern Ireland may fall into the trap that has been set for her—if she gives without further consultation, as she infers she may, a range of powers to a five-person commission to decide if and when IRA threats are sufficient for it to recommend a ban on traditional parades. That is what it boils down to.

Where will this folly end? I predict that it will end in total chaos, as Sinn Féin-IRA tests the patience of Unionism at every turn and the commission becomes part of the problem rather than part of the solution. Does anyone believe that those of us who have endured IRA bombs and bullets since 1971 are going to surrender to such threats and abuses of our civil rights? The Ulster Unionist party has a fairer and simpler solution. As in the United States of America and many other western countries, we believe that the right to assemble should be a basic human right—so long as such assembly is not primarily designed to give offence. Traditional church parades are hardly intended to give offence.

Working on the principle of the right to free assembly, we believe that it should be possible for the Chief Constable to agree codes of conduct with the leaders of all traditional organisations. We would support him in that. We have already said that we would be happy to see a registration of parades system in operation. Such a solution could be applied to all traditional parades of both traditions, so that mutual respect, not mutual antagonism, could be fostered.

I ask the Home Secretary and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland to think long and hard before embarking on the drafting of any parades legislation that would pander to the IRA's tactic of creating further ghettoisation in Northern Ireland. That is indeed the IRA's fundamental requirement in its sectarian war and its attempt to dominate and control the Roman Catholic tradition.

The Ulster Unionist party will look objectively at any proposals intended to help to stabilise our community; but, in line with our principled position in the past, we shall not support short-term expediency that panders to the IRA.

Despite all the pre-election allegations of partisan deals supposedly struck by the Ulster Unionists with the former Government, new Labour is unlikely to have discovered anything that was not done honourably by us on behalf of our entire community. So it will be in the future.

Finally, I apologise to the Secretary of State and to the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, the hon. Member for North Warwickshire (Mr. O'Brien), for the fact that, because of local government elections, I shall not be here at the end of the debate. The hon. Gentleman will, I am sure, understand; he may even sympathise with me after more than six weeks on the hustings.

6.22 pm

Mr. Chris Pond (Gravesham): Seeing the packed Benches and Press Gallery earlier today, I thought that word must have slipped out that I was hoping to catch the Chair's eye to make my maiden speech this afternoon, but that misconception has since been quickly dispelled. I do not know whether it will be appropriate to congratulate the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) on her speech, but I certainly congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Blackburn (Mr. Straw)—not just on his speech this afternoon, with which I wholeheartedly agreed, but on his appointment as Home Secretary.

I am privileged to stand here as the Member of Parliament for Gravesham, one of eight new Members elected for the county of Kent. You may be aware, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that we are hoping to work informally as a group to take a more strategic approach to some of the big and exciting issues that our county will face in the years ahead. Traditionally, it has been the garden of England; now, increasingly, it is the gateway to Europe.

It has been suggested to me that we might like to extend membership of our group to the Conservative Members from Kent who retained their seats. I have no great confidence that we shall be able to get the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald and the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard) to sit in the same Committee room, but I promise to try.

Gravesham's population is richly diverse, combining the Thameside conurbations of Gravesend and Northfleet with the picturesque countryside of Meopham, Shorne, Higham and Cobham. Those who have spent a lifetime in the traditional industries and trades along the river—paper making and cement manufacturing—which unfortunately have been rapidly disappearing, now live and work alongside those who pursue professional careers, many of whom commute to London each day.

Even in this corner of south-east England there is considerable deprivation and hardship alongside real prosperity, and the quality of life, even of the better off among my constituents, is diminished and demeaned by the inequality and poverty that scar our nation generally.

Gravesham also has a significant Sikh population which makes an important contribution to enterprise and to the life of the local community. That contribution is illustrated by the work of the Denton multicultural youth and education association, and will soon be enhanced, I hope, by a new Asian resource centre. Given some of the National Heritage Secretary's statements this afternoon about the use of lottery money, I shall be writing to him on that matter.

I am proud to be here representing all those groups in the constituency. It is a reflection of that diversity that Gravesham has traditionally been considered a barometer seat, in the Peter Snow sense of the word. Rarely has there been an election when the wise people of Gravesham have returned to this House a member of a party different from the one in government.

My distinguished Labour predecessors in the seat include Albert—later Lord—Murray and John Ovenden. My immediate predecessor, Jacques Arnold, was a diligent constituency Member who deserves a fine tribute for his work in that respect. I shall do my best not just to live up to that reputation but, if possible, to better it. He was also known as a vigorous supporter of the interests of Latin America. His passing may mean fewer questions about Rio de Janeiro, but I shall try to fill the vacuum with rather more questions about Gravesham. I know that he will certainly be missed by those in the Press Gallery.

Gravesham has a fine history. General Gordon built its fort in recognition of its still important strategic position on the mouth of the Thames. Charles Dickens lived there. Pocahontas died there of a broken heart. So deep was her grief, it was said, that even the quiet charms of Gravesend were not enough to save her.

Ours is a distinguished history, but a hopeful and optimistic future. Gravesham is to be the site of the new international station at Ebbsfleet on the channel tunnel rail link, making it not just the gateway to London but the threshold to Europe. That, together with the development of the Thames Gateway, offers the prospect of growing prosperity.

My constituents, however, have already paid dearly in terms of the disruption and anxiety caused by living amid major infrastructure projects: the channel tunnel rail link, the widening of the A2, and the building of Europe's largest shopping centre at Bluewater Park. I am determined that the quality of life of my constituents will be enhanced, not destroyed, by that development process.

The people of Gravesham expect from a new Labour Government the opportunity to look to the future with hope and confidence, instead of always anxiously looking over their shoulders at the past. That is why I welcome the programme set out in the Gracious Speech; in particular, it is why I welcome some of the Home Secretary's remarks earlier.

Gravesham was mentioned by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister when he opened the debate last week. He told the House of a war pensioner whom he had met when visiting my constituency during the election. The pensioner's life had been blighted by crime and disorder. He was quoted as saying:

"I fought for this country—it's not fair, is it?"—[*Official Report*, 14 May 1997; Vol. 294, c. 66.]

I visited that constituent again at the weekend. He lost both legs in a submarine attack in the war and was adrift at sea for five days. Like so many of my other

constituents, that brave and courageous man is now suffering intimidation through crime and disorder. Likewise, his near neighbour hears young people on the roof of her bungalow in the evenings. One night, she opened the door to a live firework thrown into her hallway. She is almost blind and could not see it, although she could certainly hear it.

Despite the statements that we heard from Opposition Members this afternoon, violent crime in Gravesham has increased by 400 per cent. since 1979. That is why I support the plans that we have heard about again this afternoon for faster track punishment for young offenders and why I support the ban on handguns. It is also very much why I support the pledge to create 250,000 jobs or training places for young people and the long-term unemployed, bringing back some hope to many of those whose aspirations have been shattered by the previous Government's actions.

Today's debate is about crime and disorder, which cause such a climate of fear for so many people. There is, however, another cause of that anxiety. You, Mr. Deputy Speaker, will forgive me for mentioning the fear that the health service will not be there for people when they need it. No routine operations were carried out in Gravesham and Dartford last autumn due to a lack of beds and nurses.

Yesterday, a constituent told me of his fears. On 14 February—Valentine's day—he was told that he needed an urgent heart bypass operation. He expected to be rushed into hospital, but has now learnt that it will be 23 June before he gets even a consultation with a specialist. He is an active member of the local community, but now lives in fear, as do so many others, that the NHS simply cannot cope and will not be there to help him when he needs it.

That is why I whole-heartedly support proposals to cut waiting lists and applaud the decision to introduce early legislation to clear the remaining legal obstacles to the building of a new district hospital in Dartford and Gravesham at Darenth Park, for which my constituents have been fighting for many years. I shall fight hard to ensure that when that hospital is built, it will provide sufficient beds for the district's needs. The current proposal suggests a cut of 20 per cent. in present levels, but not a general practitioner in the district believes that that number of beds will be sufficient. I shall also work to ensure that Gravesend hospital is brought back to life.

I have diverged slightly from the subject of the debate, but the issues of crime and inequality are closely linked. I hope that you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, will give me leave to say a few final words about an issue that is close to my heart: the proposal to introduce a national minimum wage. I am proud to have worked for the past 18 years as director of the Low Pay Unit. That fine organisation, staffed by committed and very able people, was established almost 25 years ago by the new Minister for Welfare Reform. I congratulate him on taking on that role.

We have argued that a minimum wage of the type that operates in every other advanced industrial country is not only a matter of decency and social justice but makes good economic sense. Low pay is the single most important cause of poverty, contributing to the threefold increase in poverty that now afflicts the lives of 14 million of our citizens. I could never understand how a nation that accounted for a quarter of the poor in the European Union, even before the opt-out from the social chapter, could be

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described as the success story of Europe. Nor could I understand why it was a cause for celebration that the poorest in Britain, whose real incomes have declined considerably since 1979, had a cash income little higher than the poorest in Hungary or the Korean Republic.

My hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland, South (Mr. Mullin), seconding the motion on the Gracious Speech last week, spoke of a constituent earning 89p per hour. The Low Pay Unit has come across wages as little as 59p and 66p an hour. One woman working in a residential care home sent the Low Pay Unit a copy of a letter written by her employer, which said:

"I would like you to work 5 pm to 9 am Monday to Sunday inclusive. Your salary will be paid in arrears at a rate of £150 a week".

Today, the Low Pay Unit was told of the case of another residential care home that pays its staff partly in cash and partly in supermarket vouchers.

One reason why I stood for election to the House was to work to bring to an end the scandal of poverty wages and the inequality that not only scars the lives of many of our citizens but demeans and diminishes the lives and the dignity of the rest of us. I am pleased that we now have a Government with a programme, outlined in the Gracious Speech, that will begin to rebuild economic prosperity for this country on the firm foundations of social justice.

6.35 pm

Mr. Michael Fallon (Sevenoaks): First, I congratulate you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, on your elevation to the Chair. We entered Parliament together in 1983, but you have progressed much further than I have or ever will—and certainly to a better class of suit.

It is my pleasant duty to congratulate, on behalf of the House, the hon. Member for Gravesham (Mr. Pond) on his maiden speech. It was an extremely polished and articulate speech. I am almost tempted to describe it as ambitious, but I am not sure whether ambition is now one of the necessary virtues of the new model Labour party. The hon. Gentleman described the new hospital to which his constituents and mine are looking forward. He omitted to mention, however, that the hospital is being developed under the private finance initiative, first pioneered by the previous Government, but I welcome the fact that the hospital will serve both our communities.

I shall not tangle with the hon. Gentleman today on the subject of a minimum wage. The Conservative party always resisted that proposal and I believe that there are other better solutions to the problem, not least in the form of minimum tax. That, however, is well outside the remit of today's debate and the amendment before us.

Conservative Members were glad that the hon. Gentleman paid tribute to Jacques Arnold. I know, from the neighbouring constituency—my colleagues who were here in the last two Parliaments will also know—just how hard Jacques Arnold worked for all his constituents, and it was right and proper that he was thanked for that. We shall miss him and it is no disrespect to the new Member for Gravesham that we express the hope that we shall see Jacques Arnold take his place again among us.

I also have the duty of paying tribute to my predecessor for Sevenoaks. Mark Wolfson was one of those hon. Members who never sought self publicity; nor did he

achieve ministerial office, but he served the House for 18 years. It is right, too, that I should pay tribute to the work that he put in for all his constituents throughout the Sevenoaks constituency. Indeed, I commend his career to some 70 or 75 per cent. of the new Labour Members who will not have a chance to enjoy ministerial office but who will, we hope, find other ways of serving the House as well as their constituencies.

I am not a new Member; I am what is now described in the jargon as a "retread". I checked with my local garage and I understand that retreads are not necessarily dangerous, provided that they are correctly balanced. I assure the House that I am correctly balanced; what is incorrectly balanced is the Queen's Speech. There is an imbalance between its aims, which are a mixture of the uncontroversial, the pious and the banal, and the means, which are mandatory, minatory, bureaucratic and often contradictory.

There seems to be much about new Labour that involves banning things, whether it is tobacco advertising, fox hunting or the voting of hereditary peers. Much about the Queen's Speech is certainly contradictory. The very paragraph that speaks about the need to decentralise goes on to offer us regional development agencies that will take power away from county councils such as Kent, and strategic authorities for London that will take power away from the boroughs that currently serve it.

In the realm of home affairs, we see the Queen's Speech at its worst. We see a disturbing amount of social authoritarianism. A network of national homework centres is to be established. We are to have parental responsibility orders. The Government are even to set up healthy living centres. All those measures take the state further into the realm of the family, parenting and the local community. I doubt whether we improve parenting by substituting for it. In my view, the role of the state in that area should be to ensure that people are protected, crime is punished and good education is provided in our schools.

I am extremely wary of such all-embracing and comprehensive measures of social authoritarianism, not least from our own experience in government. Too often, we, too, were tempted into the trap of all-embracing social legislation. The Children Act 1989, the Dangerous Dogs Act 1989, and the Broadcasting Acts 1990 and 1996 come to mind. Even the institutions that we created—local police authorities, grant-maintained schools, NHS trusts—though we gave them devolved budgets and modern management and though we encouraged them to market themselves, were still in the end regarded as branches of central Government—branches of the Department for Education and Employment, the Department of Health or the Home Office.

We must think more deeply about how we make such institutions more local and how they can build up stronger ties of loyalty and affection in the communities that they serve. That applies particularly to our system of criminal justice. We need a system that more directly serves the local community.

I welcome the Government's proposal to make justice for young offenders more rapid, but we also need to ensure that it is made more local. Too often, we not only read of delays between the offence and the trial, or indeed between the trial and the sentencing, but we are told that the offenders cannot be named or that they cannot be punished in the usual way.

I hope that in opposition as well as in government, we can think again about how we encourage more transparency in our system of criminal justice, to ensure that the sentences that are handed out better reflect opinion in the local community. I therefore urge the Government to be wary of national solutions—general curfew orders or national requirements that they seek to impose from Queen Anne's gate.

I have never understood why the Home Secretary should have to approve the length of the police baton that the chief constable of Merseyside wishes his officers to deploy. I hope that the new Ministers at the Home Office will reflect on the need to move with greater common sense and to reflect more directly the local experience of the communities in which our police serve.

Those comments about criminal justice apply more widely to the way in which our own system of law is increasingly being encroached on from Europe. It is no accident that the laws that are least respected are those that are made most remotely. Nothing has brought Europe into more disrepute than the interference of the two European courts and the other institutions of the European Union.

I therefore deeply deplore the proposal to incorporate the European convention on human rights into our legal system. I do not want a Portuguese judge, however well qualified, to have the casting vote on the time limit for abortions to be carried out in Britain. Incorporation of the European convention is further pandering to the European institutions and will further reduce the rights of the House to make law for the people of this country.

In the end, the British will not be directed by commissioners, whether in Brussels or Strasbourg. I hope that in the fullness of time those who promote the European idea will realise that there is another way to co-operation and trade on our continent than the coercive, harmonising and centralising proposals being put forward in Brussels and Strasbourg.

The Sevenoaks constituency is fortunate. We enjoy a good level of prosperity, we have a low level of unemployment and we enjoy a good measure of choice in all types of schooling. That prosperity and choice are threatened by the Queen's Speech. The proposed new taxes and regulations will not encourage business or create new jobs. The grammar schools and grant-maintained schools on which parents in my constituency rely are under threat from the proposals presented by the new Education Secretary.

Above all, my constituents will lose out under new Labour because the Queen's Speech further diminishes freedom. The new social authoritarianism contained in its proposals further narrows that vital space in any successful society between what is compulsory and what is forbidden. I shall oppose the Queen's Speech and support the amendment tonight.

6.46 pm

Mr. Clive Soley (Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush): I welcome the hon. Member for Sevenoaks (Mr. Fallon) back to the House, and ask him to pass on my best wishes to Mark Wolfson, his predecessor, who served with me when I was Chairman of the Northern Ireland Committee. That was not always the easiest subject, but Mark was extremely helpful on a Select Committee which, for

obvious reasons, was dominated by Conservatives and Unionists at that stage. He worked diligently and I always found him helpful.

Before I deal with the issue of law and order, I shall comment briefly on two other aspects of the Queen's Speech, which is one of the most radical and exciting documents that it has been my good fortune to read for many years, and by far the best in the past 18 years that I have been a Member of Parliament—but I would say that.

I draw attention to a matter that we shall have an opportunity to debate on another occasion: the commitment in the Queen's Speech to reform the British constitution and the way in which Parliament works. We must carry all Members of this House with us when we do that, but I cannot over-emphasise how frustrating it is that the House of Commons, which set the world standard for so many centuries, has not reformed itself sufficiently over the past 70 years to make itself a modern Chamber. The same applies to the constitution.

The remarks by the hon. Member for Sevenoaks on the European Court of Human Rights was one of the saddest comments on the modern Conservative party. That human rights legislation was drawn up by the British and introduced in Europe precisely to stop the abuses of power that had taken place in Europe in the period leading up to the second world war. We should be proud of that and we should sign up to it with pride. We wrote it, we brought it about, and we did that because we believe that human rights are a fundamental right of the people of the world. We should continue to say that proudly.

The other issue that I shall touch on briefly is Northern Ireland. I welcome the progress by my right hon. Friends the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and the Prime Minister. It was right to start talks at a particular level in a particular way with Sinn Féin. It is important to break the logjam that has developed. I pay tribute to the last Government—particularly the then Prime Minister and now Leader of the Opposition—for putting Northern Ireland at the top of their political priorities. The right hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major) was the first Prime Minister to say expressly that he was doing so and he deserves credit for that.

Unfortunately, the peace process in that sad area was bogged down by the mathematics in this place and the problems involved with getting the Unionists to shift position. I am sorry that the hon. Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone (Mr. Maginnis) has left the Chamber. He also served on the Select Committee and he was quick to condemn, quite rightly, the violence of the IRA. However, it is easy to forget that Unionist paramilitaries have killed almost as many people as the republican paramilitaries. The House and British and Irish people everywhere must be even-handed in their approach: killing for political purposes, whether by Unionists or republicans, is absolutely unacceptable. It is also counter-productive. We should say that to both sides equally.

I return to today's debate on law and order. I am encouraged by the thinking emanating from the Home Office. For 18 years, we saw crime increase dramatically while the prison population accelerated out of control and prison sentences had little effect on the number of crimes committed. The right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean), who spoke on behalf of the Opposition today, made great play of the increased number of policeman that the Conservative Government

[*Mr. Clive Soley*]

put in place—although that is debatable—and the many ways in which his Government had got tough with criminals. The reality is that the majority of criminals are not caught and convicted.

I was burgled the weekend following the general election, so I feel like getting tough with burglars. I have been the victim of three or four attempted burglaries in the past few years, and I assure the right hon. Gentleman that, in my experience—which is considerable—burglars do not wait around for a police car to appear on the scene before they commit their crimes. Most burglars check the street for police and station someone outside before they commit their crimes. Crime prevention is the key.

As I said when we were in opposition, we reduced burglaries on one estate in Shepherd's Bush in my constituency by 66 per cent. in two years. We achieved that result almost in spite of the Government. The number of burglaries has fallen in my constituency because the police and local authorities have learned to work together on good crime prevention schemes. I pay credit to the previous Government for providing some money for a concierge system in high-rise blocks. If that system operated in all high-rise blocks, burglaries in those buildings would be cut dramatically and they would become much better places to live. Crime and vandalism—particularly the sort of vandalism that stops lifts working—could be prevented. That would make people feel safe and improve their quality of life.

I make several appeals to the Minister of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff, South and Penarth (Mr. Michael). I am delighted to see him on the Front Bench; he has extensive knowledge of crime prevention and his work in the youth system will stand him in good stead in his present position. We must get the police forces of this country, in conjunction with local authorities, to compile a map of crime—we have one already, to some extent. We could then pinpoint the types of crimes that are causing most problems in certain areas and direct our resources in that direction. Crime prevention is about good targeting, which is achieved by encouraging the police and local authorities—and sometimes the voluntary sector—to co-operate. That has occurred in some of the examples that I have mentioned. It is vital to compile such a map.

It is not sufficient to view crime prevention in terms of stronger locks, better windows, and so on. My hon. Friend is aware of the importance of the youth service. Many hon. Members have talked in their maiden speeches about the links between unemployment and crime. That link has always existed, not because the unemployed are more likely to be of criminal mind but because unemployment breaks down families. The children of broken families—who have never been near a job because they are supposed to be in school, but often are not—frequently get into trouble and commit crimes. Many crimes are committed by 14, 15 and 16-year-olds, so we must target them.

The last Government did virtually nothing in that area. They ignored the problem until late in the day when they began to realise that locking people up and throwing away the key was not the answer. We should lock up persistent offenders and those who are a danger to the public, but we must not believe that it will prevent crime in the future. Incarceration is not an answer in its own right—and it never will be.

I hope that my hon. Friend will examine the Scottish family court system because I believe that it provides a better opportunity for dealing with families and offenders, who are often 15 or 16 years old. I am particularly interested in the opportunities presented by the new disorder legislation to which the Home Secretary referred. Such legislation must be used carefully, but it will provide considerable opportunities if we get the balance right.

I want to involve victims and the local community in the process of dealing with criminal offenders so that we can alleviate crime through social pressures. However, we must not follow the same road as the United States, where the victims of crime are allowed to watch—and often appear to enjoy watching—the infliction of punishment on offenders. For example, in some states, victims of crime are allowed to witness the death sentence being carried out. That practice—and the death penalty itself—is totally abhorrent and must never be allowed to happen here.

Perhaps we could design a structure that allows the court to enable—rather than order—the victim to meet the offender in certain circumstances in a controlled setting. Such meetings could be chaired by a police or probation officer or someone like that. That would make the offender confront what he or she has done to the victim. It would be difficult to do that in the case of violent crimes, but even then there are exceptions.

I know of a care in the community patient who is now in a secure unit and who stabbed someone in the street. Some years later, the victim is trying to write about his experience. He has come to terms with the stabbing and would like to meet the offender so that he can explain his actions. It would enable both parties to understand what happened in that dreadful incident. We should allow that to occur, but we must be careful to strike the right balance.

Returning to the disorder legislation, we have all heard about one or two families who have caused mayhem on a particular street or an estate. I see no reason why, if we had a suitable structure, we could not involve such families in discussions with their neighbours. Some months ago, I intervened in such a case in my area when I saw that some youngsters were not attending school. When I asked them what school they attended and told them to go there, I received the answers that one might predict in such circumstances. I could not deal with them brutally, grab them and say, "Look here, I'm taking you to school." So I did what I had to do in such a situation and, after several days, I called the police who took the lads to school.

Those youths were also causing problems in the immediate area, and it would be helpful to involve their families in discussions with the school and with others who were affected. I should like to have the opportunity to explain why I was concerned about the welfare of those children. I know that, if I could spend some time with them, they would not simply shout abuse at me. I am sure that I could establish a relationship with them.

The courts can be quite imaginative in such cases. However, the previous Government were keen on boxing in the courts and forcing them to give certain sentences for certain offences. I want to give judges and magistrates more leeway. We need to be more flexible. In doing so, we must be careful, as there are certain legal rights that have to be respected. We must ensure that the right of

appeal is always there. We could do far more about involving victims and offenders in resolving the problems that afflict those areas. I have no hesitation in saying that, in the estates and streets that suffer problems from particular families, we should have much greater powers to move that family out of the flat or house where they are causing mayhem. It then becomes not only part of the punishment but part of the solution.

That is the sort of imaginative thinking in which we should get involved. There are difficulties and dangers, but all I am asking at this stage is that my right hon. Friend includes in his Bill the power to experiment with such measures. I think that we would be surprised at how much we could achieve. Other countries do it, so why not here?

Another point that I wish to highlight is the wider crime prevention issue, because I heard the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard), the previous Home Secretary, condemn drug dealers right, left and centre. I have no problem with that, as I do exactly the same, but I also remember how, when he was Home Secretary, he persistently ignored not just questions but a letter from me asking him to ban alcopops. What message do we send out when we say, "Let's get tough on drug addicts, but let's sell alcopops to teenagers and thus encourage under-age drinking"?

The body that is supposed to regulate the drinks industry had better get tougher with it, because if the industry is not prepared to regulate itself, the message should go out very loud and clear from here that the House will have to regulate it. It is unacceptable that soft drinks that are laced with alcohol are sold, and encouraged to be sold, to young people. We have to stop it, because we know that there is a close link between crime and alcohol.

Parenting is the other underlying problem which the previous Government just could not recognise. I complained bitterly throughout the last five or 10 years of the Conservative Government that they were doing nothing about parenting or family structure. All they did was make moralistic noises about single parent families or about whether one was married, both of which are pretty irrelevant to the problem of parenting. What matters in parenting is good relationships between the child and the parent, and the child growing up in a secure setting.

Obviously, it is easier if there are two parents, and that is generally to be encouraged, but let us get away from the scapegoating role and focus instead on how we can help people to be good parents. We can do that through nursery education and by not putting families with young children into high-rise blocks, where the children either have to play indoors all day—how would we cope with that if we were the parents?—or they play outside unsupervised and fairly quickly drift into petty vandalism and, all too easily, crime.

It is also about teaching parenting skills in schools. Teachers tell me that it is quite difficult to teach those skills at times. I accept that. I am not skilled in that area, but I do know, however—teachers also seem to accept this—that we can teach relationship, education and social skills, and out of that comes the recognition about how to bring up children to have respect for themselves and for others. For too long the previous Government allowed families to split apart, encouraged by matters such as unemployment and inappropriate housing, which made it

easier for families who were just about surviving, who were just about good enough parents, to tip over suddenly into crisis. When that happens we all sit back and wonder why the kids are a problem. The kids are a problem because we failed the families.

My last message today to my Front-Bench colleagues is, please can we have a policy on families and parenting? It is not a matter of having a Minister for the Family or a Minister for Children. It is certainly not just a matter of having a Minister for Women, as some people have suggested, because that misses the point almost totally. It is a question of trying to achieve effective co-ordination between Government Departments, local authorities and health authorities, and between the private sector and those bodies.

We can do it, and in my judgment the best way to do so is to have a subcommittee of the Cabinet chaired by a senior Minister—I suggest that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary would have more than enough status to do that, as he has already produced a good paper on parenting—so that we can start to address issues which, if addressed now, will give us a much happier society in 10, 20 or 30 years' time. We look at the monster who kills, abuses or sexually assaults a child and we all forget that that monster, 20, 30 or 40 years' ago, was in all likelihood an abused child. If we do not learn that lesson and try to direct something towards it, we will go on repeating the same cycle of deprivation, poverty and cruelty and impose it on others as well as ourselves.

7.4 pm

Mr. Andrew Rowe (Faversham and Mid-Kent): I congratulate the Minister on his appointment. Quite apart from anything else, he comes with very long experience of the voluntary sector, and I know that many people in it are delighted with his appointment.

My only regret is that the voluntary sector has been brought back to the Home Office, as, in my experience, the Home Office deadens the impact of the voluntary sector. Under Conservative Governments, it has always eventually managed to escape into another Department, but under Labour Governments, it has always been brought back to the Home Office. I encourage the Minister whole-heartedly to use all his experience and expertise to ensure that the dead hand of the Home Office does not deaden the impact of this very important sector. It has something to do with the fact that most people in the Home Office have to spend most of their time policing or restraining in some way, and when they get to the free fall and open experiments of the voluntary sector they get slightly apprehensive.

I wish the Minister well in his new post, but hope that he will take seriously the importance of liberating and strengthening the voluntary sector, despite the Home Office.

Because the last time that we had a Labour Government was 18 years ago, there is a temptation to refer back to it for the origins of this Queen's Speech, but we must resist. New Labour has strained every nerve to disown any link with previous Labour Administrations, and we have to go back further for its roots. The roots for this Queen's Speech really belong with Cromwell's major-generals. There lies the root of the Government's puritanism. Are we talking about smoking, pistol shooting or country sports? If people enjoy it, ban it. If it does not fit in with

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what Tony or Peter believe to be good for us, let us have zero tolerance of it. In the short term, it is popular stuff. The British have always had a puritanical, punitive streak, and it is easy enough to appeal to it—for a while. I warn the Government that the British public's tolerance of puritanism runs out quite quickly.

One of the least attractive features of the general election campaign was the competition between the two main parties to present themselves as more repressive than the other. Curfews, punishments for parents, restrictions on judges flowed out from the hustings to evoke a popular response in our time, rather like that sought by Hieronymus Bosch in his. There was precious little about supporting the efforts of parents and children who want to do well. The hon. Member for Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush (Mr. Soley), who has a distinguished record in speaking out for parents and the support of families, has done the House a service in an excellent speech.

Look at the messages that we are getting from the new Labour Government. To a generation castigated for lack of respect for other people, what do we get in the first week of the new Government? Two enduring images. One, a Minister of the Crown crossing his fingers at a solemn moment in Parliament itself. Then, of course, we are told that new Labour wants to get rid of all formality. How does a school pupil corrected for refusing to wear a school uniform respond to the refusal of the Chancellor of the Exchequer to wear evening dress, or to the Prime Minister's desire to be on first-name terms with his subordinates? Make no mistake, they are the right hon. Gentleman's subordinates, as many of them will rapidly discover.

Many years ago I was in the Navy. I remember that on one occasion there was an exercise with the Americans. I was struck by the informality between the relations of their officers and men. It took me a little time to realise that to maintain discipline, the penalties on American ships for minor breaches of discipline were draconian by contrast with those on our ships. I suggest to Labour Members that they go for formality. If they do not, they will find themselves facing even more savage discipline.

New Labour's slogan is, "Tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime." Let us unpick that a little. Let us start where all of us surely can agree. Punishment for wrongdoing is, and always will be, a central component of any law-abiding society. Children recognise the place of punishment in marking out the boundaries that they need so as to feel secure. In the recent survey by the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children entitled "Talking about my Generation", it is disclosed that only one in six of 12 to 15-year-olds believe that it should be for that age group to decide whether they should smoke or drink alcohol. Fewer than one in four thought that members of that age group should decide at what time they should return home in the evenings.

Such young people clearly understand that if they break the rules they will be punished. When a secondary school invited pupils in its sixth form to help in interviewing new staff, it found, somewhat to its surprise, that the sixth formers always chose the candidate who they thought would be most successful at imposing discipline. So we have no disagreement about punishment.

Children want especially—it is something that we all want—that punishment should be predictable and fair. It is highly significant that most of our criminals are young men and women who have been disproportionately criticised and physically punished more than their law-abiding contemporaries. Their punishments have been more frequent, more violent and less predictable than that of others. I distrust the tide that is sweeping us towards longer and harsher punishments without an equal concentration on recovering as many young people as possible for a productive, law-abiding life.

That is why I am an enthusiast for the new scheme "CSV on line", which was launched last month by community service volunteers. It is designed to attach a full-time volunteer mentor who is close to the age of the young offender. The idea is simple. Someone who understands what it is like to be 15 in 1997 will help with school work, ensure that appointments are kept and that court appearances take place, for example. Such a scheme has much potential to recover some young crooks. It illustrates the cardinal principle that lies behind getting on top of crime and other related problems. That is the principle of making use of young people.

In all the rhetoric of the election and in all the verbiage of the Queen's Speech, virtually nothing has been said about the most important resource of all, which is young people. The old slogan, "Use it or lose it" applies to the skills and energy of young people as well as to anything else. Young people have already shown that if they are given the chance they are the most effective opponents of drug peddlers in schools, of bullying and of racial harassment, as well as being the most effective agents for passing on positive attitudes to other young people.

Young people are currently underused. Indeed, they are often ignored. That being so, we wonder why only half of them bother to vote in a general election and why so many of them become irresponsible. I should respect the Queen's Speech a great deal more if it referred to listening to young people as readily as it refers to punishing them.

I acknowledge that the Queen's Speech contains a positive policy aimed at young people in the form of the work-to-welfare programme. Surely we can all applaud whole-heartedly the aspiration to take 250,000 young people from the unemployment register into work. There is no canker more destructive of the young man or woman than the lack of a job. If new Labour can do better than the Conservative Government, who produced more than 900,000 more jobs between 1992 and the end of 1996, I shall be the first to give them credit. I have my doubts, however, about whether the Government's scheme is the vehicle to achieve the aim.

The Government's finance for the programme is extraordinary. For how long will the money last? That will depend on the level at which the windfall tax is set. If it is set high enough to allow the scheme to last for more than six months, costs will inevitably increase for utilities' consumers. New Labour has promised to give consumers 40p a week by cutting value added tax on fuel. That will look pretty meagre if they are asked to pay an extra £1 a week to finance the windfall tax.

Let us assume that the money is available, that companies' legal challenges fail, that definitions stand up and that shareholders and customers fork out gladly. But how will the scheme work? The Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment, the hon. Member for

Newport, East (Mr. Howarth), has been transmuted by the magic of a general election from being a Conservative ex-Minister representing an English seat into a new Labour Minister representing a Welsh seat. I am sure that he feels gratified. I must warn him, however, that general election magic has its limitations. It will not, however much he wishes it would, remove the practical problems of making a big scheme work.

It is not, of course, the first such scheme. Conservative and old Labour Governments have tried several times to break the vicious circle of under-achievement at school, lack of employment, loss of self confidence, welfare dependency and crime. They all found that it was not easy to do so. What will be new Labour's magic ingredient? If 250,000 young people are involved, it will be a big scheme. New Labour Ministers will be desperate to be seen to deliver a central promise of the new Jerusalem. Delivering presumably means getting 250,000 young people into full-time, long-term employment.

Will new Labour manage to avoid the pitfalls that have bedevilled earlier projects? Will the scheme choose or avoid those young people who are so far behind even the norms of inner-city unemployed youth that they will need several weeks of skilled pre-education and training if they are to reach the threshold at which they can begin to be trained?

Such pre-training is extremely expensive and tends to play havoc with the target timetable of a big scheme. It is the youngsters who will need that training who, above all, will need the scheme. Will those running the scheme be able to resist the temptation which, for example, those running the Manpower Services Commission's schemes were unable to resist, of going for employment that will enable large numbers of people to be deployed, even if the skills required are either at low level or not much in demand outside the scheme?

Conservative Members will be listening for the first complaints from the young themselves that they are merely in make-work projects. I am prepared to accept that the Conservative Government's youth training scheme had its defects. At the same time, I see nothing in the Government's proposals to assure me that they can improve on the Conservative Government's drop-out figure of 34.6 per cent. What about work experience? I shall certainly take my hat off to new Labour if it can find enough work placements without displacing any existing employees who happen not to attract the £60 a week rebate.

As for education, the old temptation to reach targets by excluding, formally or informally, those least likely to achieve them in the time allotted will surely rise to haunt the architects of this scheme, as it did their predecessors. In short, I applaud the aspiration and I wish it every success, but I remain cautious about its practicalities.

I end by repeating my plea to the new Government. Listen to young people themselves. Give them some real responsibility in the society in which they are growing up. At the end of the previous Parliament, I moved a ten-minute Bill, which suggested that there might be some mileage in requiring local authorities to spend a portion of their money only on schemes put forward by young people themselves, and that young people themselves could make work. I believe that such responsibility would transform a generation that is being excluded from most traditional responsibilities until they are about 24 or 25 years old.

The Government should challenge the energy, ingenuity and strength that are so often used for criminal activity, and should use them to build up the areas and communities that are so much in need of those qualities. If they succeed in that, I will wish them well.

7.21 pm

Mr. Fraser Kemp (Houghton and Washington, East): I begin my maiden speech by thanking all those who worked so hard to get me elected: my party members who selected me, and the electors who returned me to the House on 1 May. I was born in the constituency that I represent. It gives me an extra special honour to represent people in the area whence I came.

I pay tribute to my predecessor, Roland Boyes. I do so not merely because it is a convention of the House, but because he is a friend of mine. He was the Member of Parliament for Houghton and Washington from 1983, before which he served for four years as Member of the European Parliament for Durham. Roland was a passionate campaigner for social justice. He represented his constituency with dignity and courage wherever he went. He also served as an Opposition spokesman on the defence and environment teams.

Apart from politics, Roland had another great passion: photography. He produced an excellent book of photographs of people who work in the House: Members and their staff. Hon. Members are aware that he suffers from Alzheimer's disease. Being an inveterate campaigner, he is very involved in raising money for the Alzheimer's research trust that he established. Many hon. Members on both sides of the House have contributed to that trust.

I met Roland on Friday last week. He and his wife asked me to pass on their thanks for the hundreds of acts of kindness that hon. Members have shown to Pat and Roland. I am sure that I can say with confidence that I can take back the good wishes of the House.

I read Roland's maiden speech in 1983, and I was struck by one of his remarks. Fourteen years ago, he said that Labour's slogan should be "enough is enough". He was clearly a man ahead of his time, because I seem to remember that that slogan figured significantly in Labour's general election campaign.

The constituency that I represent is a series of mining villages in the Durham coalfield. Its past is very important. The hard work and talents of its people determine its future. I was born there 38 years ago into a mining family, and I know a little of its history. I beg the House's indulgence while I say a few words about the constituency.

The new town of Washington was a former mining village. It makes a great claim to be the ancestral birthplace of the founding father of the United States of America. The Shiny Row ward contains the Penshaw monument, the great beacon to returning north-easterners. It was erected as a tribute to the first Earl of Durham. It is not my intention to praise the former coal owners—I doubt whether any of my predecessors have done so—but it is significant that it was erected after he was given the nickname "Radical Jack", because he supported the extension of the franchise in the Reform Act 1832. He may be a role model for those in the other place who are contemplating opposing Labour's plans for constitutional reform.

[Mr. Fraser Kemp]

I make the proud boast that, every time the House or the nation hears Big Ben, they hear the tongue—the piece that swings in the bell—which was cast in Houghton-le-Spring. We are also proud that, in Hetton, George Stephenson, one of the founding fathers of the railway industry, designed a railway in advance of the more famous Stockton and Darlington.

It would be wrong of me not to mention football, which is another great passion in the constituency. I am sure that my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Mr. Kilfoyle), who is a good friend of mine and whose constituency contains the Anfield ground, will not object to my saying that we also produced one of the greatest managers of Liverpool, Bob Paisley.

The men and women I represent are decent and honest. They are descended from generations who have toiled underground to generate the wealth of this nation. The adversity they have faced has given them the strength and humour that run through their veins as richly as any coal seam in the earth, but there are also despair and poverty in many parts of the constituency. One can physically see it cut into people's faces as if by a surgeon's knife. All that the people I represent ask for is a fair deal and social justice. They are hard-working people, with talent and ingenuity. What they want is a fair crack of the whip and some decency.

I am proud of the traditions in the constituency and its past, but I know that it is the future which matters. The people's skills and talents, many of which have remained unused and wasted in recent years, can and will make a great contribution towards this nation. We are making a start. It is a proud boast that my constituency is the fastest growing automotive area in the United Kingdom, and long may that remain so.

It cannot be right that 40 per cent. of technological innovation since the second world war has originated in the United Kingdom, yet we have only 5 per cent. of those markets. Clearly, the Government must address that problem. We must nurture that innovation, and encourage the development of skills and sensible long-term investment, as well as forge links between education and industry, so that we can close the gap between our ability to invent products and our ability to manufacture and sell them on the world markets.

All of us in politics are regularly concerned by what we hear: occasionally it affects us deeply. I want to dedicate this speech to someone whom I had never heard of and have never met. On 1 May 1997, a man went into a polling station and asked the presiding officer if she could point out the Labour candidate on the ballot paper. With great courage, because there were other electors in the station, he admitted that he could neither read nor write. If I and the Government show one tenth of the courage, guts and determination that he showed in voting Labour on polling day, Britain will be a better place. The Gracious Address fills me with great optimism.

7.29 pm

Mr. Richard Allan (Sheffield, Hallam): I am very pleased to have been called to make my maiden speech today, when so many fine maiden speeches have been made. In particular, I pay tribute to the hon. Member for

Houghton and Washington, East (Mr. Kemp) for the great political passion which has obviously brought him to the House.

My predecessor in Sheffield, Hallam was Sir Irvine Patnick. He was and is above all a good Sheffielder—and in Sheffield that counts as much as, if not more than, one's party political allegiances. Sheffielders have the particular quality of speaking quickly and not wasting words, and I hope that I, too, will bring those qualities to the House.

As well as spending 10 years in this place, Sir Irvine was well known for the decades of dedicated public service that he performed on various local authorities in Sheffield. Indeed, legend has it that it was he who coined the great phrase "the socialist republic of South Yorkshire"—a phrase which, of course, needs updating nowadays, but the phrase "the new Labour (socialist values updated for the modern era) republic of South Yorkshire" somehow does not have quite the same ring.

The constituency of Sheffield, Hallam covers the south-west of the city of Sheffield. While in general it is an affluent area, it contains quite a mixture of people and places, as befits most of our metropolitan constituencies. I want to refer particularly to three key aspects of the Hallam division. The first is the part of the Peak district that it contains. That magnificent landscape of moors and gritstone edges was preserved by previous generations of far-sighted people who understood the deep meaning of the environment and the necessity to preserve it against development. We now enjoy it, along with our many parks and the wonderful tree landscape that we find in Sheffield.

Secondly, the constituency contains the two universities of Hallam and Sheffield, which are the biggest employers in my constituency. They have brought so much to Hallam and I am sure that much of my time in this place will be spent on issues concerned with them. Thirdly, there is the strength of our local communities in Sheffield, particularly in the Low Edges estate, where local residents have set up a community safety forum to work with the police and other agencies to deal with some of the problems in the area, particularly those relating to youth crime.

That brings me to the subject of the debate. I want to draw attention to the importance of the environment in reducing crime. If we are to tackle the causes of crime, we must create a high-quality urban environment that people will respect. As we can all see, when a house becomes derelict in our area, as it starts to fall down the vandalism begins. First one window goes; then the rest rapidly follow. The quality of our urban environments is crucial if we are to start tackling the causes of crime.

We should increase the visibility of the police in our communities. Our community constables in Hallam do a first-class job, and that should be built on so that we see more police on the streets.

Given all this—from the natural glories of the Peak district to the academic glories of our universities, and the human glories of our communities—I am filled with pleasure to have been able to speak on behalf of Sheffield, Hallam today.

7.32 pm

Mr. David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire): It is a great pleasure to be able to make my maiden speech as Member of Parliament for my home area of North-West

Leicestershire. I am proud to inform the House that I stand here representing two parties, the Labour party and the Co-operative party. The Co-operative party is the political party representing the co-operative movement, and it is dedicated to the promotion of co-operative principles as a means of organising our society and our economic interests. I am therefore very happy to be the Labour and Co-operative Member of Parliament for North-West Leicestershire.

Let me begin by thanking my predecessor, Mr. David Ashby, who had represented North-West Leicestershire as a Conservative since the seat was created in 1983. I first met Mr. Ashby when we were opponents in the 1992 general election, and I found him then—as I have since—to be a courteous, thoughtful and industrious representative of our area. Let me express the appreciation of the 85,000 people of north-west Leicestershire to David Ashby for his work over some 14 years: we are most grateful for his unflagging efforts on our behalf.

Some people are due little in the way of thanks. David Ashby owes no thanks to the press, which hounded him unmercifully following allegations about his personal life. I deplore that. He has nothing for which to thank the courts, where he was the victim of an appalling legal decision when he tried to clear his name. I deplore that, too. He was given few thanks by his local association when it deselected him because of the adverse media coverage. That was the most deplorable thing of all.

One of the first telephone calls that I received after the election was from David Ashby. He gave congratulations and much helpful advice about tackling the daunting role of a newly elected Member of Parliament. That is the true measure of the man.

North-West Leicestershire is at the heart of our country. It is very much middle England—the real middle England, not that of Ford Galaxies, second homes in Italy and nanny problems. We are a working area and proud of it. We are at the transport crossroads of the midlands, sitting astride the M1, beside the East Midlands airport. Our two major towns urgently need partly completed bypasses to be finished—but more of that on another occasion.

The main urban area in my seat is centred on the former mining town of Coalville, which, like the country, has endured the pain of unemployment. The pit closures that took place in the 1980s and early 1990s had a profound impact—economically, socially and environmentally—but the town has responded well to local authority initiatives, and now has good shops, a first-rate leisure centre and a magnificent discovery park celebrating the industrial background of North-West Leicestershire and the bright technological future that is now emerging.

To the west of the seat lies my birthplace, the pleasant market town of Ashby de la Zouch, famous for its castle and for being the setting of "Ivanhoe", reputedly the Prime Minister's favourite book. Further west still is another former coal mining area, around the communities of the Ashby Wolds. There is a sizeable rural core to the seat, containing numerous attractive villages, while in the north are the bustling and prosperous villages of Castle Donington and Kegworth.

Many hon. Members will have rushed through my constituency on the M1 without being aware of its many attractions. In view of the comments of the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald

(Miss Widdicombe), I am pleased to say that those attractions do not include any penal establishments. I urge hon. Members to stop for a little: they will probably stay very much longer. All we need to link this archipelago of communities is improved public transport, and especially the restoration of passenger rail services—the second flag that I will wave on another occasion.

Environmentally, North-West Leicestershire has contained vast tracts of derelict land, which are now being restored with great assistance from the national forest, whose headquarters are in the seat. The attentions of R. J. Budge and others who want to opencast remaining coal seams on greenfield sites are a constant threat and handicap, and the circling opencast vultures will certainly form the basis of a future speech from me.

Socially, North-West Leicestershire's proud mining culture survives, as I am sure that it will for generations. It underpins a community spirit that remains sound and in good heart—but communities, like individuals, need to feel safe and secure in order to thrive. Various corrosive influences have been at work, which have made life difficult for the residents, businesses and towns of our area.

An example is the small town of Ashby, which has a population of 12,000. Its gracious Georgian market street, with its numerous pubs, shops and restaurants, acts as an entertainment mecca for a wide catchment area. That often means large numbers of people in a confined space, which frequently produces an unacceptable level of crime and anti-social behaviour on our streets.

Like those in other parts of middle England, we have called long and loud for more effective policies on crime in our part of Leicestershire, which has seen crime double and violent crime treble in a political generation. I am therefore pleased to have been called to speak in a home affairs debate on the Loyal Address. I particularly welcome the Government's programme for the reform of the youth justice system. I am a lay magistrate in my constituency, but I am not out of touch, as Conservative Members have suggested. Lay magistrates live in their constituencies, experience their problems and are open to their opportunities.

For many years, I have been concerned about the persistent problems caused for the many by the disruptive few who are the grit in society's eye. I welcome the commitment to fast-track punishment for some offenders, the creation of youth offenders' teams and the establishment of a national youth policy board.

My constituents have not stood idly by waiting for effective Government action on crime. Three years ago, we resolved to tackle the roots of crime rather than just wringing our hands and calling for harsher sentences for the few who reach our courts. We believed that, unless we acted, we would all take some blame for crime in our society. Acquiescence would merely be guilt by default. The North-West Leicestershire Safer Communities Forum was formed as our way of fighting crime, and I commend it to the House. It is a partnership of concerned people from the Churches, youth organisations, police and local councils, and it could be a model for the Government as they plan how best to extend the crime prevention and community protection roles of local authorities.

The forum took a long look at our area, analysed the facts and figures, the incidents and the trends. We put local criminality under the microscope and got to know it

[Mr. David Taylor]

intimately. We tackled the roots of identified problems within our very limited resources. We backed a secured-by-design concept for the layout and specification of housing estates. Developers are now taking that up as a sales plus, and wider building regulations incorporating security measures would help us to make real progress.

We designed a closed circuit television system and lobbied hard for its installation to ensure that shoppers, residents and businesses would benefit from a more secure Ashby town centre. That system is to be switched on in a few weeks. Of course, it will not be a panacea because some crime will be displaced, and there are also civil liberties concerns; but the system is a big step in the right direction. We can at last reclaim the streets of our town.

We are also creating a youth council in north-west Leicestershire to involve young people in the running of the area. The council will be a grey-suit-free zone so that the young will have a real say. When they speak, we must listen, and when their demands are reasonable, we must respond. If we begin to nod because boredom or intolerance has set in, the time will have come to examine our behaviour because we shall be contributing to the alienation of the young with the sad results that we know only too well.

We all have the bricks in our hands to build a safer Britain together, but it cannot be done from the Floor of the House. Bricks can be laid only on firm foundations by local people throughout the community. I am certain that ours is the right way ahead. Building safer communities needs local involvement and a supportive national framework within which to work. The community safety plans in the Gracious Speech are the guiding lights for advance.

A statutory responsibility on local authorities to produce local crime prevention partnerships involving the police and other agencies is welcome, although it is much overdue. Of course, local plans must integrate with the Government's priorities on crime prevention and community safety, and the Home Secretary should report annually on those priorities.

For too long, the approach to crime prevention has been incoherent, ad hoc and, crucially, underfunded. We have relied on reports from a less than coherent Home Secretary, whose only solution to crime was to lock up yet more people. The Government's crime fighting initiatives are based on good practice by local authorities such as the one in north-west Leicestershire. I commend them to the House.

7.43 pm

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): I am grateful for this opportunity to make my maiden speech. My constituency is highly desirable, not least because it has a Conservative majority of 11,300. It is bounded on the east by the Lymington river and on the west by the River Avon. Between those two rivers along the coast are the towns of Lymington, Milford-on-Sea and Barton-on-Sea, all of which are excellent resorts offering a view of the western Solent and the Needles.

The constituency stretches north through the town of New Milton to the New Forest villages of Sway and Burley to Ringford and Fordingbridge. It takes its name from the fact that it contains more than half of the

perambulation of Crown lands that make up the New Forest. It is perhaps one of the most important conservation areas in the western world, yet it would not exist but for the wisdom of 11th century monarchs and their passion for hunting. Even today, hunting is very much a way of life and a source of livelihood. I hope that hon. Members will bear that in mind later in the Session.

I pay tribute to my predecessor, Sir Patrick McNair-Wilson, who was a formidable and assiduous worker on behalf of his constituents. Perhaps his singular achievement was that, after 28 years, he was able to hand over the New Forest much as he found it. It is little wonder that the boundary commissioners found it necessary to replace him with two hon. Members rather than one.

In some respects, the Gracious Speech sounded tough in terms of law and order, but, for some time, the Home Secretary has given the impression of being tough. Now that he is in office, I hope that he will be able to maintain that impression of toughness and, more important, give concrete evidence of it. I hope that he will be able to resist the advice of new social scientists, new criminologists, the new elite, new vegetarians or whoever who sit behind him.

I listened with interest to the speech made by the hon. Member for Tooting (Mr. Cox) because I was a prison visitor to Wandsworth, and I am now a prison visitor to Wormwood Scrubs. Some years ago, those who approached the prison block from the main gate waded through a sea of litter. All sorts of articles had been hurled from cells. They included shoes, clothing, food and equipment, such as the abundance within those walls. In the prison cell, one was confronted by every convenience that the Argos catalogue could supply. That has changed dramatically in the past few years.

A few days ago, I confided in a murderer friend whom I visit once a month that I was considering voting for my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard) as the leader of my party. His reaction was such that, had I been less tolerant, it might have ended our friendship. His response was not a consequence of a belief that there was something of the night about my right hon. and learned Friend; it was entirely a measure of my right hon. and learned Friend's effectiveness in changing and toughening up the regime in that institution. I commend that reputation to the Home Secretary and urge him to pursue a similar one. We should eschew currying favour with the criminal classes.

7.48 pm

Mr. Bill Etherington (Sunderland, North): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. May I first congratulate you on your appointment? You will be sadly missed on the Select Committee on the Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration and I wish you well.

I compliment the hon. Member for New Forest, West (Mr. Swayne) on his excellent maiden speech. It was interesting to hear. I did not agree with much of it, but it was well presented. I also wish well my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Home Department and his team because, although they may not inherit a poisoned chalice, they do not inherit anything that is worth talking about. They have a tough job ahead.

I was interested to hear the debate on prisons. The first thing we should be examining is how many people who have been described as violent, anti-social and a threat to

society are in prison. It would be interesting to know how many of them are in prison and what percentage they make up of the prison population.

Of the advanced nations in Europe, we have the highest proportion of the population in prison. We need to ask questions about that. Far too many people seem to be languishing in prison for offences that most reasonable people would think do not deserve prison.

I remember that the Opposition used to ridicule my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister when he talked about being tough on crime and tough on the causes of crime. The second part of that phrase seemed to be largely overlooked. If we do not know what the causes of crime are, there is not much chance of being able to do much about it.

In answer to a question that I put to him, a previous Home Secretary, who is also standing for the Conservative party leadership, informed me that less than 1p per citizen per annum was spent on research into juvenile crime. I sincerely hope that, in power, we can do a bit better than that.

I am impressed by my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary's insistence on speeding things up. I hope that we will see that first in relation to immigration and asylum seekers. At a recent meeting of the Council of Europe I attended, two motions were passed. One was that no one, be they an asylum seeker or an immigrant, should be put out of a country until their appeal had been heard. I trust that Britain will abide by that. The other was that children who were involved in such situations would not be incarcerated, but looked after properly in a family atmosphere. I trust and hope that that will also come to pass.

We have a poor record, not so much on the policy of immigration as on the way it is carried out. We read of many cases where people suffer injustice. If we are in favour of social justice and fairness—I know we are—we need to abide by those motions. We must show a better face to the world on this issue.

We must do something about the time it takes to bring juvenile offenders, in particular, to justice. Whether they are guilty or innocent, there is no excuse for these things lingering on for months on end. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has assured us that process will be speeded up. I look forward to that happening.

What impressed me above all in the Queen's Speech was the undertaking that the House would debate the abolition of handguns. I greatly welcome that. I hope that, eventually, the ban can be extended to all firearms, dangerous air pistols and all other weaponry that is designed to maim or take life. We do not have to face bears, lions or tigers in Britain; there is therefore no need for anyone to have such weapons. Britain will be a much better place to live in when we get rid of all those horrible weapons.

I greatly welcome the measures on education, which were the central plank of our election-winning campaign. I look forward to the abolition of the assisted places scheme, which meant that the taxpayer underpinned the private education sector. I have stated in the House that I have never objected to anyone wishing to purchase private education for their children—that is up to them—but what I object to is people who do not want to do so being dragged in through the tax system. The measure is a great step forward. Reducing class sizes for five, six and

seven-year-olds is well worth attaining, and I assume that hon. Members on both sides of the House will be in favour of it.

Eliminating the nursery voucher scheme will be a great step forward. That has not been mentioned, as far as I am aware, but I know that it will come. Many good local authorities already provide places for four-year-olds, and sometimes three-year-olds, in pre-education classes, and I look forward to the time when that is universal. We can look forward in the next few years to that working its way through and gradually improving education at all levels.

I also look forward to the introduction of legislation on the funding of political parties, which is long overdue. The present situation is a disgrace and a blight on the parliamentary system. I point that out, particularly to Opposition Members, most of whom have been involved with the sort of thing that led to the setting up of the Nolan committee. It was set up because, basically, in many cases, the behaviour of Conservative Members left much to be desired—not all of them, but very many. I hope that the Nolan committee, which was accepted in the House, will continue to move forward, will be respected and will widen the scope of its activities so that all of us in the House, the vast majority of whom are decent, honest, hard-working people, can again obtain the respect of society in general, which, sadly, we do not have—not to any degree. That will be a welcome step in the right direction.

Much of the new Government's economic planning is based on reducing unemployment. My constituency has had more than its share of unemployment—and it is still way above the national average. It has a low-wage economy. I look forward to the measures having a distinct effect on my constituency and the north-east in general, which for far too long has had more than its share of that undesirable political effect.

We have heard a lot about the windfall tax. I hope that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer will make it realistic. I hope that he will obtain enough funds to ensure that we start to make an impression on unemployment. My belief is based on Keynesian economics, which more or less worked for 50 years—until 1979. They will bring about an improvement in society, particularly for younger people, many of whom see no future. Of course, that matter is tied up with crime. *[Interruption.]* If the hon. Member for Worthing, East and Shoreham (Mr. Loughton) would like to intervene, I am willing to give way to him.

Mr. Tim Loughton (Worthing, East and Shoreham): I am working up to it.

Mr. Etherington: Just take your time then.

I am pleased that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has reopened the initiative on Northern Ireland. I am a little pessimistic in some respects because I believe that only when we get a united Ireland—however long it takes—will we achieve peace in the Province. Nevertheless, I feel good will towards both the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and the Prime Minister for their endeavours, just as I felt good will towards the previous Prime Minister and Secretary of State for Northern Ireland for their endeavours, although in the end they proved not to be too successful.

When I was asked what I was most looking forward to when Labour got into power, I said legislation on the minimum wage, which Opposition Members seem to be

[Mr. Etherington]

so paranoically opposed to. I am in favour of it because it would bring about a redistribution of wealth. If as a party we say that we are in favour of social justice and fairness, we must start to do something about the huge and ever increasing gap between the haves and the have-nots. If, at the end of five years, we have not had some impact on that issue, we will have failed. I think, however, that we will start to make some meaningful progress.

Labour Members have already said in this debate that we want to build a better society, and work against self-interest. Since 1979, however, the population has been encouraged to be greedy and selfish, and it will therefore take a long time to establish belief in a different philosophy. We will also receive very little help from Conservative Members in trying to achieve that transformation. Such a philosophy is alien to the beliefs of Conservative Members, who look after vested interests. The Conservative party is currently anything other than a one-nation party.

I regret that, for two years, the Government will be committed to the previous Government's public expenditure figures. That commitment will lead to some difficulties, but it is a challenge which the Labour party will face. I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer will find ways round the problems.

I am very pleased that the European convention on human rights will be incorporated into our law, because Britain has reached a stage in its history at which an unwritten constitution is not good enough to function in a modern world or sufficient to meet our population's expectations.

8 pm

Mr. Bob Russell (Colchester): I represent the only golden constituency in the eastern counties. As one East Anglian hon. Member or another, may I congratulate you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, on your appointment?

The convention is that hon. Members pay tribute to their predecessors. I have a problem with that convention, however, because the Colchester constituency is new, and the two hon. Members who served the different parts of the town and the many surrounding villages for the past five years had a good sense of political survival, and moved to nearby constituencies. They both therefore continue to serve as hon. Members. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Maldon and Chelmsford, East (Mr. Whittingdale), who was formerly the hon. Member for Colchester, South and Maldon, and to the hon. Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin), who was formerly the hon. Member for Colchester, North, for their sterling service to the town and people of Colchester.

I pay tribute also to the hon. Members who preceded them: Lord Wakeham and Sir Antony Buck—who was, arguably, the last hon. Member to serve the town of Colchester as one entity. Although Sir Antony's more recent past has been somewhat more colourful, I pay tribute to the many years of service—from 1961 to 1992—in which he served Colchester either as a single constituency or as a part constituency.

There are those who say that, following the 1979 general election, the old Colchester constituency was somehow gerrymandered out of existence. I would not

comment on that belief, but will say only that, after growth in the Essex population and a need to provide a 17th Member of Parliament, common sense prevailed, and Britain's oldest recorded town was reunited as a single, urban constituency. As a former mayor of the borough of Colchester, I am delighted to be the hon. Member who represents my home town.

Colchester is one of Britain's most famous garrison towns, and I look forward to representing both citizens in khaki and residents of Colchester. Colchester also has one of Britain's leading zoos, which specialises in endangered species. The former Home Secretary would therefore be a welcome visitor whenever he cares to visit.

On the edge of Colchester is the university of Essex, which is Britain's most international university. I have had the pleasure of working there for the past 11 years, serving the university not in an academic position but in other ways.

Last but not least, Colchester has a football league team—which is the only one that has been admitted to the league twice. We have had the penalty of relegation to the Vauxhall Conference, followed by promotion from it. There is, after all, life for Hereford United after events there.

As you will know, Mr. Deputy Speaker, Colchester is Britain's oldest recorded town because, 2,000 years ago, when the Romans invaded, it was the most famous town in southern England. It subsequently became Britain's first Roman capital. Colchester has much history, from Roman times to the Norman conquest and up to the present day. I am pleased to say that, in the civil war, during the siege of Colchester, we sided with Parliament. The siege, which caused much damage, was unfortunately caused by the royalists.

In the past decade, much damage has been done to the industrial heart of our town, although other developments brought new jobs. The 600 Group, however, disgracefully destroyed the Colchester Lathe Company. It sold the factory site for use as a Tesco supermarket, took the money and left town. The world-famous Colchester lathe is still manufactured, however, albeit in Yorkshire.

Colchester is famous for having the greenest council in Essex, and one of the greenest in Britain—but one would perhaps expect that from a Liberal Democrat-controlled council.

The Opposition amendment states that the House congratulates

"the previous Government on its achievements in tackling crime and protecting the public".

That statement provides sufficient reason not to support the amendment, because crime doubled under the previous Government.

As for protecting the public, the former Home Office Minister, the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) will remember that, when Colchester borough council asked for financial assistance from the Government to buy security cameras for our town centre, I wrote him a generous, co-operative and constructive letter. Instead of receiving a simple no from the Government, however, I received an extremely rude, arrogant and dismissive letter. The money was, of course, not forthcoming. We could have accepted a reply citing a simple lack of money.

Fortunately, Colcestrians do not take an answer of no lying down, and the campaign continued. I am pleased to say that those security cameras have now been installed,

because eventually we received a small grant, which was only half of what we would have received had the then Government delivered on their statement. We heard many words on law and order from the previous Government, but help was not initially provided for security cameras in our town centre.

We were, however, blessed with a bootcamp by the previous Government. I sincerely hope that one of the first actions of the new Home Secretary will be to close that blot on the Colchester landscape, which has been established within the military corrective training centre. The Prison Service did not want it and the military authorities did not want it. We were lumbered with it because the then Home Secretary was in the market for gimmicks before a Conservative party conference. Something had to be done, and that was that.

The bootcamp is a very expensive gimmick, and costs approximately two to three times as much as a normal institutional placement. I should think that the last thing we want is to have our young criminals placed in a military regime, from which they emerge fitter, stronger and with a team spirit that they did not have when they went in. The bootcamp is a big mistake, and I hope that the new Government will soon do away with it.

Our problem, however, is that new Labour is planning new prisons: new Labour, new prisons, new crime. There is a problem because, for at least the next two years, the Government plan to continue the policies of the defeated Government. I urge the new Government to think very quickly and to find ways and means to reduce the prison population. Prison is an expensive way in which to deal with people, many of whom are there because they have psychiatric problems rather than criminal tendencies.

We need many more police officers—more bobbies on the beat. I welcome Ministers' statements that they plan to be tough on crime and tough on the causes of crime because, to build a safer society, we must prevent and detect crime.

Another matter that needs to be dealt with is the police authority quangos. There are nine local police authority nominees in the county of Essex. As of April next year, Thurrock and Southend-on-Sea will cease to be part of the county of Essex. However, each of those places has been allocated two seats on the police authority. In other words, two districts in Essex will have four seats and the rest of the county of Essex, including Colchester, Harlow, Brentwood, Chelmsford and other major centres, will have to share the remaining five. In simple arithmetical terms, that is not fair. The whole principle of quangos needs to be examined, but, as a first step, let us introduce some fairness.

Our communities are very important. I have already mentioned Colchester's green credentials, but Colchester is under massive pressure from new development. The structure plan requires the town to build more housing. The country as a whole needs more housing, but my big fear is that as Colchester contains large landholdings owned by the Ministry of Defence and the national health service, the Government will press the town to release land over and above what a town of its size would normally expect. I seek assurances that Colchester borough council and Essex county council will have some say in what land the Government dispose of, because, as far as I can see, new Labour is not changing what the Conservative Government proposed. One way to tackle

crime is to deal with the environment in which people live. Broadly speaking, Colchester has a green and pleasant environment, but it is under threat and the biggest threat is posed by what the Government plan to do with their landholdings.

8.11 pm

Mr. Mark Todd (South Derbyshire): I must first thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for calling me to speak. I should also like to acknowledge the wide-ranging speech made by my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary, which offered several measures that the electors of South Derbyshire will welcome.

Even if we set to one side the specific points of her dispute with the former Home Secretary, the speech by the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) raised some interesting questions about the accountability of Ministers and the role of truth in the House, which I shall certainly note for myself.

I have one slightly unusual personal acknowledgment to make, as I am not the first member of my family to sit in the House. Many years ago—between 1929 and 1935—my grandfather was a Conservative Member, mostly. I have to say "mostly" because, at that time, politics was even more fluid than it is now and changes of party allegiance were not particularly uncommon. He sat for the constituency of Berwick-upon-Tweed, whose current Member of Parliament spoke earlier.

My grandfather did not speak often in the House, but concentrated mostly on local issues such as farming and fishing and matters relating to ex-service men, of whom he was one. At the end of his time here, he had renounced the Tory Whip having had a dispute with his party. He just about made it as the official Conservative candidate at the 1935 election, but he lost the seat in an unusual example of tactical voting in which the Labour candidate stood aside to ensure that the Liberal candidate would be returned. That gives an insight into my family's political history. It also shows that my grandfather was no party zealot, and I suppose that the Whips will have to take that on board to some extent. He listened carefully to what others had to say. I greatly admired him as an old man, long after he had given up politics, and I missed him greatly when he passed away.

That experience brought one other point home to me. My own son, who is four and a half, is almost exactly the same age as my father was when his father—my grandfather—was elected as a Member of Parliament. I asked my father about his experience of that time. He regarded it as an unpleasant period of his life. He did not see much of his dad and did not enjoy the experience greatly. It has certainly made me strongly committed to making the House a more family-friendly place. I greatly appreciate and support the huge increase in the number of women in Parliament, but have never regarded changing the House's workings as being solely their concern. It is a matter for fathers, too. I want to ensure that I see my son as much as possible and take as much of a part in his upbringing as I can.

I turn now to the more conventional aspects of a maiden speech. The previous Member of Parliament for South Derbyshire was Edwina Currie. I say quite freely that I had a very friendly relationship with her, and anyone who stayed up until 5 am to watch the results of the election on television saw me kiss her on the cheek. We got on

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well—rather better, I suspect, than she did with her parliamentary colleagues. Anyone reading her novels will find that the antipathy between her and some fellow Tories comes across more strongly than any antipathy between her and Labour Members. In any event, she predicted extremely accurately the result in her constituency and in the country at large, although I do not think that her contributions were welcomed by her colleagues.

Edwina Currie was, and probably will continue to be, a fighter for causes which were not fashionable in her party. For that, I admire her considerably. It is not conventional to defend gay rights in the Conservative party, but she took that stance. It is not conventional to be as strongly pro-European as she was, but that was her position. She was brave. I by no means agreed with everything she stood for, but there were some other worthwhile nuggets—opposition to the reintroduction of grammar schools and, latterly, opposition to the existence of the hereditary peerage. I have yet to issue her with a membership form for my party, but there were encouraging signs of a shift in our direction towards the end of her time as the Member for South Derbyshire. She pursued individual constituents' cases with vigour and added a good deal of colour to local life. I shall not seek to imitate her, but she certainly offered something that will be missed in some contexts.

Another previous Member of Parliament I must mention is George Brown who represented the seat, also with colour, for a considerable time. He is well remembered by many residents and, when confronted with an unpopular policy, is quoted—in a number of studies of the 1960s and 1970s—as saying, "They'll never stand for it in Swadlincote." He saw that as the benchmark of opinion in his constituency, and I shall do the same. It is the key town in the area where many people have straightforward opinions, freely expressed.

South Derbyshire covers a large area to the south and west of the city of Derby. It also includes 18,000 electors within the boundaries of the city itself, which makes up about a quarter of the electorate. About another quarter is concentrated in the urban area of Swadlincote, which was the heart of the south Derbyshire coalfield and the home of British Coal's largest research centre. The last pit closed in 1988; virtually all the mining jobs have gone, but there is still a little opencast activity. My hon. Friend the Member for North-West Leicestershire (Mr. Taylor) referred to the industrial heritage of his area. My constituency, which borders his, shares that heritage.

The remaining half of the electorate live in the many villages and hamlets across the area, ranging from villages linked to the mining industry, such as Linton, to those such as Melbourne, which is linked to agriculture and has a stately home nearby. There are several notable country houses in the constituency, including Calke abbey and Melbourne hall, as well as one major public school, Repton, and one prison at Foston Hall. The last two can, possibly, be confused.

Many might consider South Derbyshire to be the centre of the universe. It has one claim in addition to that—it is the precise centre of the United Kingdom population. A hamlet in South Derbyshire marks the point exactly in the middle of the population. That is a small claim to fame,

but it shows that the constituency is a typical, precisely middle England seat in which people want their opinions listened to.

We are also the home of the runaway champions of the Doc Martens league—Gresley Rovers. The team would have been promoted to the Vauxhall Conference had it had adequate ground facilities. I shall give the club my full support in any steps that it takes to gain that.

Agriculture remains a key industry. I well remember attending a packed meeting of Derbyshire farmers with the hon. Member for West Derbyshire (Mr. McLoughlin) at the time of the bovine spongiform encephalopathy crisis. That remains a key issue. We look forward to a clear, progressive policy from the Government that will allow us to market our produce with confidence.

The constituency is the home of Toyota. Its car plant at Burnaston offers more than 2,000 local jobs—a figure due to rise soon to 3,000 with the expansion of the plant. Inward investment on that scale can be maintained only with stable economic policies in a single European market.

Two major power stations still offer jobs in the area, although they have declined with the coal industry and offer far fewer jobs than they did in 1992, when I first stood for the constituency. Much of the area's employment relies on hundreds of small local firms, which offer jobs in a variety of trades and industries. People also commute out of the area for employment in engineering in Burton and engineering in Derby.

Official unemployment is extremely low, but that figure conceals a huge amount of under-employment of people who have given up their jobs with no hope of future employment. That is particularly true of people made redundant from the mining industry. They are still looking for opportunities, but they no longer appear on our registers. We also have one of the highest concentrations of part-time employment in the country. That is a key issue for the Government. We have the opportunity to introduce a minimum wage, which will be of tremendous benefit to such people. I strongly endorse that policy.

Our schools have long laboured under the weight of cuts in Government expenditure. As recently as 1989, we had one of the best pupil-teacher ratios in the country; we now have one of the worst, after seven years of cuts. Three quarters of the primary schools in South Derbyshire will benefit from the introduction of a maximum class size of 30 for five, six and seven-year-olds. That is a critical part of the Government's programme.

Nobody would claim that South Derbyshire suffers disproportionately from crime. The people of the area are some of the friendliest I know. Community really means something in South Derbyshire. Back doors are often left open and people talk freely in the streets. It is not a place of great fear and apprehension. I have listened with interest to hon. Members representing constituents for whom that is not the case. South Derbyshire is not like those areas, but crime has increased steadily there, as everywhere else, more than doubling in the past 20 years.

Our police service is stretched to the limit. Derbyshire constabulary has to protect about 20 per cent. more citizens per officer than the average English county. That imbalance stretches the force terribly. The area below the Trent valley—the major police division for my constituency—normally has four or five officers and one sergeant available to cover a huge area of urban

Swadlincote and many small villages. It is not surprising that the people there seldom see a police officer and are becoming ever more concerned about the safety of their community. The method of calculating police resources used by the previous Government entrenched that difference and disadvantage for my constituency. I have already raised the issue with the Home Secretary and shall urge a review of those methods of calculation.

I unreservedly welcome the proposals to reform the youth justice system and measures against anti-social behaviour. Before he took up his office, the Home Secretary visited an estate in South Derbyshire that, by our peaceful standards, has had problems. His proposals, together with the plans to provide jobs for jobless youngsters, will be strongly welcomed in South Derbyshire.

We had the opportunity of a visit from the previous Home Secretary during the election campaign, when he sought to make political capital out of the introduction of closed circuit television in the centre of Swadlincote. That fell on stony ground, because the chamber of trade turned up and corrected his misapprehension that the plan was the solution to all its problems. I would have thought that that was one of his more embarrassing visits during the campaign.

Our new Government have offered a programme to the people of this country and to the residents of South Derbyshire that I know they unreservedly welcome. We must now implement that programme with disciplined intent.

8.26 pm

Dr. Peter Brand (Isle of Wight): I am proud to stand here as the newly elected Member for the Isle of Wight. I shall not go through a long historical or geographical description of the island, other than to say that it is the only English constituency that cannot be reached except by ferry. I shall come back to that later.

I gladly follow convention by praising my predecessor, Barry Field, who was assiduous in the House in extolling the virtues of the Isle of Wight, especially as a tourist attraction, destination and investment opportunity for the new industries that we are trying to attract. He was also an assiduous constituency Member of Parliament, dealing with the casework generated by the largest constituency in the country. I am beginning to learn about that to my cost. While praising Barry Field, I should like to put a rumour to rest: I was not the doctor who advised him to give up his constituency duties on medical grounds.

I am proud to extol the virtues of the island to the House, but I also have a duty to point out at every opportunity the social and economic disadvantages suffered by the island's economy. It is an irony that a sunny place with a wonderful population of very nice people suffers from having the lowest gross domestic product of any county in the country. It has an unbalanced population, with the highest number of elderly people in any county, the highest number of unemployed people in the south and the greatest dependency on low-paid, insecure and part-time jobs. We cannot survive on a good climate alone. I shall point out as often as I can to the new Government that we are looking for a fairer economic deal.

The Isle of Wight is the only significantly settled island in Great Britain—or, indeed, in the European Community—not in receipt of any kind of government

assistance for being an island. There is no island factor in the distribution of funds for health, local authority services or our ferries. If Governments can fund 100 per cent. of motorways and trunk roads and pour millions of pounds of subsidy into the privatised railways, why can they not find money for one of the earlier privatisations—our ferries?

Returning to the subject of today's debate, the Isle of Wight probably has the highest concentration of prisons in the country. The prisons and the prison officers make a valuable contribution to our community and to our economic life. Much has been said, especially by the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe), about Parkhurst and the escape, which was entirely predictable. Essential security work asked for by the then governor was not carried out, because funds were not forthcoming from the Home Office. We were not surprised that an escape took place, although we were relieved that the prisoners were recaptured, thanks to the vigilance of an off-duty prison officer and the efforts of the police.

The local community was annoyed at the way in which the governor was scapegoated to hide the Government's inaction in making the prison safe. The Prison Service's loss has been the island's mental health service's gain and John Marriott now makes a big contribution to the island's community by looking after mental health services. However, he is owed an apology by the Home Office for his shameful treatment.

Hon. Members may be surprised to hear that, following the escape, millions of pounds were invested in upgrading security at Parkhurst. The previous Home Secretary, on completion of that work, immediately downgraded the security status of the prison, resulting in the loss of hundreds of prison officer jobs. That was crazy. We have one of the best penal institutions in the country, but we are not using it.

I make another plea to the Government—they must think about what penal institutions are for. The extraordinary speech by the hon. Member for New Forest, West (Mr. Swayne) illustrated the anguish of prison officers. Obviously, prisons have to be there to contain people who are irredeemably criminal—there may be some of those—but prisons should also ensure that people leaving prison have a better chance of making a positive contribution to society than when they went in. I hope that the educational work and the mental health services that have been dismantled in our prisons over the past 10 years will be restored. We must get people out of prison and allow them to make a positive contribution to society.

I have spoken enough about prisons, which—as I have said—make an enormous contribution to the economy of the island. I want to echo earlier comments about co-operation in the House. If there is co-operation, we can solve some of the problems that we all recognise. They can be solved if the will to work together exists among the Government, local authorities and regional governments—when we have them.

8.32 pm

Mr. Michael Connarty (Falkirk, East): May I welcome you to your new position, Mr. Deputy Speaker? I am very happy to follow the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Dr. Brand), who talked about co-operation. In Scotland, we tend not to see the Liberal Democrats as the

[*Mr. Michael Connarty*]

full-frontal Opposition and we have worked with them on the Scottish Constitutional Convention, which is such a big plank in the Government's devolution proposals. I look forward to more co-operation in the House, and I hope that the hon. Gentleman's party gains the respect it is due for the number of seats it has won. We may yet see the Liberal Democrats as the loyal Opposition on the Front Bench at Scottish Question Time, although I know that that matter has to be resolved by Madam Speaker.

I very much welcome the speech by my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary. It is a joy to be on this side of the Chamber and looking across at the much-depleted—in fact, totally denuded—Conservative Benches.

Mr. Michael: The Conservative Benches are empty.

Mr. Connarty: Empty is the word, as someone might take the word “denuded” the wrong way. The Opposition are certainly lacking in strength tonight.

Everyone welcomes the commitment of the Prime Minister and the Home Secretary to allow a free vote on a total ban on handguns. That is particularly true of Scots. Everyone recalls that it was not individual Members who failed to deliver a total ban; the three-line Whip by the then Conservative Government produced the majority of 25 that night. That was wrong and, on a free vote, I have no doubt that the total ban will be carried.

I have previously referred in the House to what I call “my village from hell”, which encapsulates the problems that we are trying to tackle with our crime and disorder proposals. I wish to refer to community safety. I would like to update the House on the village, which is as bad as ever—if not worse. More than 20 houses are now boarded up. There have been attempts to bring together the community, the police and the local authority to do something, but their efforts break down every time because individual citizens in the village are afraid of the families who are causing the trouble. For example, on one occasion, there were 30 witnesses to an offence, but, by the time the case came to court three or four months later, no one was willing to testify. The system has broken down because something is lacking in the present law. I hope that the Government will look seriously at ways of strengthening the hand of citizens and authorities in dealing with this matter.

There is no law to make a local authority enforce its tenancy agreements. If tenants are consistently causing complaints, there is a remedy available to the local authority, which can remove these people from their tenancy. That reinforces the fact that they are known to be the cause of the problem. Local authorities say that cases must go through the police and the courts, and that individuals must put their safety on the line before they will enforce tenancy agreements. We must strengthen the hand of local authorities to allow them to take swift action against threatening citizens.

A second issue of concern among my constituents is crime relating to paedophilia. There seem to be two trains of thought running through Scotland. We have a notorious character in Scotland—who has been lauded and given great publicity—called Mags Haney from Stirling. She goes around with a gang, and they stood outside the court during a recent case involving the molestation of a young person shouting, “Kill the beast.” Obviously, they were trying to whip up public anger.

The other approach comes from a village in my constituency where there was a recent act of molestation against a young person. One of the mothers in the village said that local people were not vigilantes interested in breaking the legs of the person who was found guilty, but added that sentences such as he received had left them with no faith in the system. The man involved had a long history of offences against young people, but was charged in such a way that the maximum sentence was three months. The sheriff almost apologised to the people in the court for the length of the sentence. There must be some way in which a sheriff or a judge can question whether the disposal of the case by the procurator fiscal in Scotland or the prosecuting authority elsewhere is appropriate and can call for a retrial on a much stronger charge. Clearly, the charge in this case was not adequate for the crime committed.

Incarceration, and longer incarceration, for those found guilty is what the public want, and we should provide that to protect children. I have spoken previously with the Minister of State, Home Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff, South and Penarth (Mr. Michael), and have said that we have to consider treating people who commit such crimes as ill—not insane, but mentally ill. Therefore, they should be compelled to get treatment to get to the bottom of their behaviour, which results in them abusing the most innocent. People might scream that this a breach of civil liberties, but I would argue that civil liberties for one's self derive from respect for the civil liberties of everyone else—especially the young and the vulnerable who are abused by paedophiles.

I welcome the mention in the Queen's Speech of the appointment of a drugs supremo—although I always worry when someone is appointed as a tsar or an emperor. We are about to abolish the rights of one unelected organisation, and I do not like the idea of another being appointed. When I worked on a crime and drugs campaign in Scotland, I met every chief constable in Scotland. I was told that, in some areas, between 50 and 70 per cent. of all crimes are drug-related offences. People are either trying to get money for drugs, or older criminals are selling drugs to people who then commit crimes to provide money for drugs.

May I give a word of warning? In some parts of Scotland, they have been using methadone replacement treatment for heroin users, and we have had several deaths in my constituency among people taking methadone as a substitute for heroin. There is also a strong rumour that methadone is being sold—it used to be methadone jellies, but is now methadone spittle. People have to drink it in the chemists, but they then go outside, spit it into a canister and sell it on. I see the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) grueing, as we say in Scotland—screwing up his face—at that idea. We have to be worried about the use of methadone, because it is clear that people want to get money for other drugs and do not therefore use the methadone as given.

I know from consideration in the last Parliament of what became the Crime (Sentences) Act 1997 that it is intended to put people in prison for longer. It seems to me that we have to think seriously about the role of prisons. I do not know whether it will be in the remit that the Government give themselves—I am sure that my hon. Friend the Minister of State will tell us—but we should look at what prisons do. Prisons must protect people, but

we must also think about the second role, referred to by the hon. Member for Isle of Wight, which is rehabilitation of prisoners so that they do not reoffend.

I want to put two points on the agenda. First, the Government should consider banning alcopops—not only banning advertising of alcopops, but banning them from sale. We banned the Skoal Bandits nicotine chews, even though that had jobs implications in Scotland. It was even supported by the hon. Member who represented the area concerned. We should similarly consider banning alcopops, despite the fact that the industry is clearly doing a roaring trade. Alcopops do lead young people to drink.

Secondly, I should like to see laws for the banning of drinking in the streets which do not leave the matter to local authorities and licensing boards. We have laws that talk about taking drink away from under-age drinkers, but I plead with the Government to think seriously about banning entirely drinking in the streets anywhere apart from designated licensed areas. That would go a long way towards dealing with some of the problems in our society.

My final plea is to do something about white collar crime, which is not mentioned in the Queen's Speech. I made a plea several years ago when a building company went down, taking with it £200,000-worth of supplies that had been supplied by a company in my local area, and we could do nothing about it. I have recently had reported to me a case in my constituency of a building company that has three businesses: one buys the supplies, another owns the lands and the third sells the houses. I have had it reported to me by one of the companies that supplied it, Carron Building Supplies, that it suspects that the first company—the one that buys the supplies—will go into receivership in the next week or so. Everyone who has supplied that company with the materials to build the houses that are there will be left with no redress, because the company has no assets. That is not a business failure: it is fraud.

I plead with the Government to think seriously about doing something to prevent limited companies from being set up with the explicit purpose of taking materials and supplies and then going into liquidation. Again and again this happens. It is a question not simply of bringing in laws to ensure that people receive interest on debt, but of ensuring that debts are paid. There is a solution: we could put a lien on the building that has been built, on behalf of those who supplied the materials. If the builder goes into receivership, the suppliers will get their money back through the sale of the property.

The banks do not seem to be interested—they are interested only in securing their own loans. It is time that the Government spoke up for the small businesses that have been ripped off for the past 10 or 15 years while the Conservative Government sat back and laughed. They even had a President of the Board of Trade who admitted that he postponed paying debt as long as possible and hoped that the companies would go into liquidation. It is up to the Labour Government to show the way on white collar crime as well as on disorder. I commend the Queen's Speech to the House.

8.43 pm

Ms Hazel Blears (Salford): I am grateful to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and to the House for the opportunity to make my maiden speech in this important debate. I really do believe that this is a turning point in politics—a time when millions of people can begin once again to trust those who govern and to have hope for the future.

I am proud and honoured to have been elected as the first woman Member of Parliament for Salford and to be a Salfordian, born and bred in our city. Salford is very much a city of firsts and it may surprise some hon. Members to hear of the vast range of achievements of Salford and her people. We have always been at the forefront of innovation and enterprise. In 1806, Chapel street, at the heart of our city, was the first street in the country to have gas lighting. In 1824, Salford corporation introduced the first horse-drawn omnibus service from Pendleton to Manchester. Those hon. Members who are aware of the historic, but friendly, rivalry between our two great cities will appreciate the significance of the direction of that journey.

Salford has always valued learning and knowledge and in 1850, at Peel Park, the first unconditional free library was opened to the public. We have always been green—even when it was not fashionable. In the 1920s, Salford police were the first to wear white uniforms, so that they could be seen through the smog. Perhaps in response to that, the council promoted the first Clean Air Act, in 1956; and, in 1972, Salford was the first modern city to be declared completely smoke free—no longer the dirty old town.

Salford has a proud history and a proud record of parliamentary representation—hardly surprising for a city at the forefront of both the Chartist and Suffragette movements. I pay tribute to two of the city's most recent representatives—Stan Orme and Frank Allaun.

Stan was a skilled engineer, a lifelong member of the Amalgamated Engineering Union, a keen and effective shop steward and a fighter for working people. He was elected Member of Parliament for Salford, West in 1964 and rose rapidly to become Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office in 1974 and Minister for Social Security in October 1976. He was always concerned to represent the people of Salford, especially those who were unemployed and those suffering hardship. Stan also played a major role in the Labour party and was a wise and respected chair of the parliamentary Labour party from 1987 to 1992. For 20 years, Stan was on the Labour Front Benches and made a tremendous contribution to the political life of this country. I wish both Stan and his wife Irene good health and happiness in all their future activities.

I also have the honour of succeeding Frank Allaun, who represented part of my seat, Salford, East, from 1955 to 1983. Many hon. Members will recall Frank's irrepressible spirit, which inspired so many of us. His fight for the reduction of arms expenditure, for full employment, for decent housing and rights for working people will long be remembered. Frank was, and still is, an active campaigner and I know that he will take a keen interest in the work of this Government. Again, I wish him and his wife Milly joy in everything they do.

Stan Orme was a great friend and colleague of Edmund Frow, who, together with his wife Ruth, worked tirelessly over the past 50 years to establish the largest collection of books, journals, pamphlets and other material charting the history of the struggles of working-class people. I am delighted to be a trustee of that library, which is now firmly established in Salford, but sad to report the death of Edmund Frow last week. I know that his spirit will live on in the work of his library.

Salford people have known some very hard times indeed, but the qualities of Salford men and women shine through the adversity of their everyday lives. They were

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and still are people with courage, determination, wit and compassion, and they have an unrivalled ability to see through falseness and to expose insincerity. Salford people, even in the hardest of times, possess an indomitable spirit and strength that cannot be crushed. In recent years, however, that strength and resilience have been sorely tested. The Conservative Government's boom and bust economics destroyed thousands of our manufacturing jobs, leaving many skilled people without work and consigning a whole generation of youngsters to a future with no hope of a job and no sense of self-esteem. It is in those conditions that crime breeds, and Salford people have lived with the fear and the reality of crime for far too long.

I welcome the proposals in the Queen's Speech for a radical overhaul of the youth justice system. The current revolving door of arrest, bail, cautions, further arrests and further cautions does nothing to stem the tide of offending or to provide justice for the victims of crime. I welcome the proposal to introduce reparation orders, whereby offenders must face up to the consequences of their crimes. I welcome, too, the involvement of parents, who must take responsibility for the actions of their children.

In Salford, we have taken many initiatives to try to identify young people who are at risk of becoming involved in crime, and to show them that there are positive things that they can do: that they do not need to steal cars or deal drugs to have some status. Fairbridge, a charity based in Pendleton, is doing a marvellous job working with young people who are at risk and some who have committed crimes. Its programme of activities combined with intensive personal support has been proved to cut re-offending by half, and it is helping two thirds of the young people back into work or education and training.

A young man in Salford, on whom many agencies had given up, went through the Fairbridge programme and wrote to thank the charity:

"You have given me the chance to do things that I never thought possible, to become part of a team, to see that if I want to do something there is nothing to stop me from trying."

We need to change others' attitudes in such a way.

We must have a twin-track approach—swift and effective punishments and long-term investment to give our young people jobs and hope. That is the real way to make our cities safer places to live.

Salford has more than a proud history: there are exciting times ahead. By bringing together our enterprise and our love of beauty, art and culture, we are forging a new city, which is an exciting and vibrant place to live.

On 19 June, building work begins on the Lowry centre—a national landmark millennium project, which will be a centre of excellence for the performing arts and will provide thousands of jobs for local people in its construction and operation.

We shall soon witness the extension of Metrolink—the light rapid transit system through the city.

The university of Salford has just launched its business and ecology centre, designed to help industry stay ahead of environmental regulation and increase its ability to compete with the best in Europe. In Salford, we shall also have the national centre for virtual reality—the ultimate in new technology.

We in Salford are famous for having our feet on the ground, but we also know how to dream. Our dream is of a city with a self-confident and vibrant community, freed from the fear of crime, giving our young people the chance to work and to have pride in themselves and their achievements.

I believe that it will be this Labour Government who will liberate the skills and talents of Salford people and I look forward to playing a part in the exciting work that lies ahead.

8.51 pm

Mr. Straw: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. With permission, I should like to make a brief statement.

The House will recall that, earlier this afternoon, both the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard) and the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) called for the publication of an official document, namely, notes of meetings held on 10 January 1995. The request was made to me, as property in such documents rests in the Crown for the time being.

Having taken advice, I have decided to authorise publication; I shall describe how that will be done in a moment. Before doing so, however, I want to make it clear that at no stage in reaching my decision have I read the documents in question. Given that they relate to the work of Ministers in a previous Administration, it would have been totally inappropriate and contrary to the conventions for me to be able to read them before they were made public.

The document for which the right hon. and learned Gentleman and the right hon. Lady sought publication were the transcribed notes of meetings held on 9 and 10 January 1995. The official record of the meetings on 10 January was made by the Private Secretary—a note dated 17 January—and was published by my predecessor, the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe, on 19 October 1995. That record was drawn up by the Private Secretary, using notes made at the time of the meetings. The request made to me today is for publication of a transcription of the Private Secretary's handwritten notes.

In fact, I am now publishing two documents. The first is an exact transcript, prepared today, of the Private Secretary's contemporaneous manuscript notes of meetings on 9 and 10 January 1995, on which the official note of 17 January 1995 was based. The second document is a fuller version of those same notes, prepared in October 1995 for the then Home Secretary, which fleshes out the manuscript notes. The House will note that this transcription contains a number of typing errors and other mistakes. I am, nevertheless, publishing it as my predecessor saw it. Both documents are now being made available in the Libraries of both Houses and in the Vote Office.

Miss Widdecombe: Further to that point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I am very grateful to the Home Secretary for agreeing with such speed to the requests that were made earlier. I hope that the documents now published will shed light, not only on matters that I raised today, but on that other issue which was of such concern to the House in October, and before that in January—exactly who insisted on the insertion of the word "Today"?

8.54 pm

Mr. Martin Linton (Battersea): I am grateful for the chance to make my maiden speech today—just in time, by the sound of it.

I regard it as a great honour to represent Battersea in the House. The constituency has many claims to fame. In 1892, it was one of the first constituencies to elect a Labour Member of Parliament, although he was not a member of the Labour party, which had not been created, but of a home-grown organisation, the Battersea Labour League. In 1922, Battersea became the first constituency to elect an Asian Labour Member of Parliament, Shapurji Saklatvala. In more recent years, it has been represented by Douglas Jay, who was its Member of Parliament for 37 years and was followed by Lord Dubs, whom I am sure many Members would wish to congratulate on his recent appointment.

In the past two Parliaments, Battersea was represented by John Bowis, whom I knew long before he was a Member of Parliament, when we worked on opposite sides of Smith square and sometimes had a drink in the Marquess of Granby. Although we are from different parties, I am glad to say that there were never any personal differences between us and I am glad to pay my respects to him and to the work that he did for his constituents during his 10 years as their Member of Parliament.

Sadly, I cannot claim to have the same respect for some of Mr. Bowis's colleagues in Wandsworth borough council, who did their best to gerrymander Battersea into Conservative hands, as a few of them had the honesty to admit, by selling entire estates to private developers and, more insidiously, by selling vacant flats on the open market instead of renting them to people who they knew to be in acute housing need—unlawfully, as the district auditor has since found.

It is traditional to say a few words about the constituency that one represents. Battersea, and Balham and central Wandsworth, which are also in the constituency, have been changing rapidly. Traditionally, they made up a tight-knit community where one could often find three generations of the same family in neighbouring streets, but, as a result of Wandsworth's housing policies, many sons and daughters have been unable to find anywhere to rent in the area and have had to move out. Families have been dispersed and communities broken up by the policies of a party that called itself the party of the family. Strangely, although the council has been found to have been acting unlawfully and although the motive was obviously political, no action has been taken.

In the few minutes that remain, I shall talk about what the Conservatives have done, not only in Wandsworth, but nationally, which has been far worse. In that regard, I welcome the commitment in the Gracious Speech to restore confidence in the integrity of the political system. Before the general election, the Prime Minister warned his predecessor that he risked leaving a stain on his reputation by his failure to act decisively on the cash for questions affair.

The money involved in cash for questions was only ever counted in thousands. What will stand to the discredit of the outgoing Government for far longer was their failure to stop the corruption of our political system through the growth of large secret donations to the Tory party, often from overseas. That is why we should all

welcome the commitment in the Gracious Speech to regulate and reform the funding of political parties. The unpalatable truth is that the past two Tory election campaigns were financed to an alarming extent either by British business men who believed they were buying honours or by overseas business men who believed they were buying favours.

When the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir N. Fowler) gave evidence to the Home Affairs Committee, he said that no honours could have been sold because that would have been illegal under the Honours (Prevention of Abuses) Act 1925. Such blind faith is not apparently shared by Scotland Yard, which recently investigated the alleged case of cash for knighthoods involving the former Conservative candidate, Derek Laud.

Scotland Yard could also look at the case of Sir Graham Kirkham, who received his knighthood soon after making a donation of £4 million to the Conservative party. It could also investigate the entire honours system over the past 18 years; it will be found that more than 50 per cent. of the honours given for services to industry or to exports went to the 5 per cent. of firms that make donations to the Conservative party.

Indeed, if Scotland Yard could investigate undeclared private donations as well, I am sure that it would find an even closer correlation between donors and honours. The Conservative party could certainly assist by opening its books for inspection. That, I am sure, would reveal that the systematic sale of honours has always been a significant source of Conservative party funds. Indeed, the system might have continued indefinitely—

Sir Michael Spicer (West Worcestershire): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Is the hon. Gentleman allowed to make such a controversial maiden speech?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: It is the custom of the House not to interrupt a maiden speaker. I have discretion over the matter, and I see no difficulty here.

Mr. Linton: I am not trying to be controversial; I see that the right hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr. Lilley) has now come out in favour of a ban on overseas donations—so I am making a cross-party point, although the right hon. Gentleman's conversion is somewhat Pauline, given that his party fought two elections with tainted money. To make the point, I need only mention Asil Nadir, Octav Botnar, Nazmuddin Virani of BCCI, John Latsis, Mohammed Al-Fayed and Slobodan Milosevic—and I could go on.

The Conservative party has always maintained that the money is given with no strings attached and for purely idealistic motives. Common sense should tell Conservative Members that if they raise money from business men, especially overseas business men who have no hope of honours, there must be the expectation of a favour. All their troubles can be traced back to this basic failure to understand human nature: the Hamilton affair and the Aitken case both sprang from a single disillusioned donor. The best thing the Conservatives can do now is make a clean breast of it and open their books to public inspection.

There is a cancer in our political system: it is called undisclosed income. If Conservative Members want to help to clean up sleaze, I suggest that they take action

[Mr. Linton]

quickly to ban overseas donations and to declare all donations over £5,000, as our party has done—before they are forced to do so by law. Every other European country has introduced at least these two restrictions in the past 20 years. It is to the eternal discredit of the outgoing Government that they held out so long against sanity.

9.1 pm

Mr. Michael Howard (Folkestone and Hythe): I begin by congratulating the Government on their election victory and the Secretary of State for the Home Department, the right hon. Member for Blackburn (Mr. Straw), on his appointment. The right hon. Gentleman and I have had many jousts across the Dispatch Box over the past three years. I wish him well in his office.

I also join in the right hon. Gentleman's tribute to Sir Michael Shersby. He was a true friend to me; like the Home Secretary, I benefited considerably from his experience and detailed knowledge of the police and our criminal justice system.

I congratulate all who have made their maiden speeches in the debate. I was able to hear only the last two of them, both of them good in their own way. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Salford (Ms Blears); I thought her speech was a model of what a maiden speech should be. I am sure that we shall hear a great deal from her and from the hon. Member for Battersea (Mr. Linton)—and from all who made maiden speeches today.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) has made a number of allegations about my conduct as Home Secretary. The most serious was that I misled the House. Let me state categorically that I did not. I shall deal with each of her allegations in turn.

At the heart of our disagreement is the decision that I took to dismiss Derek Lewis as director general of the Prison Service. My right hon. Friend disagreed with it. She is entitled to her opinion, but I believe that she is wrong. In September 1994, six prisoners, five of them IRA terrorists, broke out of Whitemoor prison. Just four months later, after I had been given repeated assurances about improvements in security by the then director general, three dangerous prisoners escaped from Parkhurst.

The independent report into prison security, which I commissioned, severely criticised the management and leadership of the Prison Service. It concluded that

"it is surprising that neither he—

the director general—

"nor his board recognised the signs and symptoms of failure and inefficiency that were so obvious and so dramatically illustrated by the escapes from Parkhurst and Whitemoor".

The report made no such criticism of me. As I told the House at the time, if it had, I would have resigned.

I believed then, as I believe now, that the conclusion of that report made Mr. Lewis's position untenable. My right hon. Friend has questioned the adequacy of that report. I reject that criticism. The report's author, General Sir John Learmont, is a distinguished and respected soldier, and former quartermaster general of the Army. One of his fellow assessors was an experienced prison governor and

regional director of Her Majesty's Prison Service. They reached their conclusion after taking evidence from Derek Lewis, and after taking account of his response to their criticisms.

It is true that the picture of the Prison Service presented in that report was different from that presented to me by Mr. Lewis. It is true that I had to choose between them. I did. I believed then, and I believe now, that it was my public duty to take that decision. On that matter, I had to overrule my right hon. Friend. That is at the heart of her grievance and her disagreement.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): What was the attitude of the right hon. and learned Gentleman's permanent secretary at that point?

Mr. Howard: The hon. Gentleman knows perfectly well that I am not at liberty to disclose the advice given to me by senior officials, and I shall respect that convention. If the permanent secretary wishes to respond to the hon. Gentleman's question, it is for him to do so. As the hon. Gentleman, with his long experience, knows full well, it is not for me to disclose to the House the advice that I received from the permanent secretary on that matter.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald made a series of other allegations. Many of them relate to a meeting that took place on 10 January 1995. The House should note that my right hon. Friend was not present at that meeting, as it took place some six months before she became a Minister at the Home Office.

Let me tell the House about the circumstances in which that meeting took place. It occurred on the day on which I had to make an important statement to the House about a series of failings in the Prison Service. On 1 January, Fred West hanged himself at Birmingham prison; on 2 January, there were riots at Everthorpe prison; and on 3 January, three dangerous prisoners escaped from Parkhurst.

Questions were rightly being asked about the future of John Marriott, then governor of Parkhurst. There had been serious shortcomings in the security arrangements at his prison. Indeed, the position at Parkhurst was later described by Derek Lewis as a shambles, yet I had been given specific assurances by Mr. Lewis about the security improvements which he said had been made there.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald spoke at length about the successes of the Prison Service under Mr. Lewis. There were also some spectacular failures. Little wonder that I wanted some answers.

Mr. Gerald Bermingham (St. Helens, South): When the former Home Secretary came before the Home Affairs Select Committee in January 1995 to answer questions from me about geophones at Parkhurst, he said that the money was there and available. I understand that he subsequently learned that the money was not there and was not available. Why did he not either write to me or inform the Home Affairs Select Committee that he had made a mistake? Why was it buried? Was it simply because he did not want to come clean?

Mr. Howard: The hon. Gentleman is wrong. I shall deal with that allegation in detail in a moment or two. The

money that was due to be spent on geophones was indeed switched to another budget and then replaced, and the money intended to be spent on geophones was spent on geophones in the very year in which it had always been intended to spend it on geophones. That is the short answer to the inaccurate question put to me by the hon. Gentleman.

The decision taken so far as Mr. Marriott was concerned was to move him from his job as governor to other duties, pending the outcome of the disciplinary investigation, rather than to suspend him. As Mr. Lewis has explained on many occasions, that was entirely a decision taken by him and other members of the line management team. That was what he told the Home Affairs Committee of the House. I do not believe that he misled the House.

I was, of course, entitled to be consulted about that decision, and I was. I was entitled to express a view, and I did. I have never made any secret of the fact that the view that I expressed at the time was that the decision to move him was a fudge. That view was recorded in the minutes of the meeting, which I placed in the Library at the time of our debate in October 1995.

What I was not entitled to do was to tell Mr. Lewis that he should suspend Mr. Marriott, and I did not tell Mr. Lewis that he should suspend him. The decision was one for Mr. Lewis, and, indeed, he decided not to suspend the governor. At no time did I cross the line between what I was entitled to do and what I was not, and at no time did I threaten to overrule Mr. Lewis.

My right hon. Friend quoted an answer that I gave to the hon. Member for Sunderland, South (Mr. Mullin). This was the question:

"Mr. Lewis says that he was given a deadline by the right hon. and learned Gentleman by which to agree to the removal of Mr. Marriott, after which he would be overruled. Is that true?"

This was my reply:

"There was no question of overruling the director general. He made the decisions that were made on that day."—[*Official Report*, 19 October 1995; Vol. 264, c. 520.]

I stand by that reply. Indeed, a similar question was directed by the same hon. Gentleman to Mr. Lewis when he appeared before the Select Committee. Mr. Lewis was asked:

"Did the Home Secretary tell you to make sure Mr. Marriott was off the premises by the afternoon?"

and replied,

"No he did not."

My right hon. Friend and the hon. Member for St. Helens, South (Mr. Birmingham) referred to geophones. The truth is simple. I was asked at the Home Affairs Committee whether money had been transferred out of the geophone budget. I replied:

"No, not to my knowledge."

That was an accurate answer, to the best of my knowledge at the time.

Six months later, officials told me that money had been transferred out of the geophones budget, but that equivalent sums, as I have just described to the hon. Gentleman, had been transferred back into it, so the sum earmarked for geophones was spent on geophones in the year in which it was intended that the money should be spent. In the words of Mr. Lewis,

"the decision was of no practical significance."

That was why I decided that it was not necessary to write to the Select Committee.

My right hon. Friend's final allegation is that a piece of Conservative Central Office briefing sent to hon. Members was in substance inaccurate. It is, of course, a deeply shocking allegation that Central Office briefing should ever be inaccurate. In fact, my right hon. Friend concedes that the briefing was technically accurate. That may make the more cynical Members think that it was one of the better documents provided to the House by party headquarters. I hope that my right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Cambridgeshire (Dr. Mawhinney), the chairman of the party, will forgive me.

I have always acknowledged that Mr. Lewis was not allowed to serve the remaining term of his contract. That relates to the point made by my right hon. Friend in relation to what was said about the matter of compensation. However, the fact that he was not allowed to serve the remaining term of his contract does not mean that his dismissal was either unjust or unnecessary. I do not believe that it was either.

I have dealt with all my right hon. Friend's allegations. I do not believe that they have any substance. Every decision that I have taken in my career in government was taken because I thought that it was in the public interest.

Miss Widdecombe: I am most grateful to my right hon. and learned Friend for giving way. As ever, his replies do not address the precise questions that I raised. I am interested in his response that there was no question of overruling the director general. In the transcripts that the Home Secretary has now made public, my right hon. and learned Friend said:

"It will be seen publicly as a"

fudge.

"I don't want to intervene formally."

My right hon. and learned Friend is now telling us that he always knew that he could not intervene. The fact is that he did contemplate intervening formally, and that is why he said so.

Mr. Howard: The fact is that I did not intervene, and that I did not cross the line between what I was and was not entitled to do. As the former director general has said on numerous occasions to the Home Affairs Select Committee and in many other interviews that he has given, the decision taken on that day was his decision.

I say this to my right hon. Friend: she is perfectly entitled to disagree with my judgment, but there is no basis for her attack on my integrity. I came to this House determined to uphold the highest standards of public life, but I was also determined to get things done. I believe that I have done both, not least in my time in the Home Office.

Mr. Gordon Prentice (Pendle): Can the former Home Secretary tell us when an instruction is not an instruction? At the meeting of 10 October, he said:

"John Marriott cannot continue as governor . . . I can't conceive of a clearer case for suspension."

Was that advice or was it an instruction?

Mr. Howard: I have told the House and the hon. Gentleman that I was entitled to be consulted, and I was.

[Mr. Howard]

I was entitled to express an opinion, and I did. However, I was not entitled to tell the former director general what to do, and I did not. He did what he had always intended to do: he did not suspend the former director general; he decided to move him. It was his decision, as he has explained to the House and to the nation on numerous occasions.

I turn now to the main subject of this debate. When the Prime Minister was in opposition, he set me a challenge. At the beginning of my term of office as Home Secretary, he asked me to accept one criterion to measure the success of my policies: falling crime. Had the Prime Minister known what would happen over the next four years, I doubt whether he would have set me that challenge. In the next four years, recorded crime in England fell by 10 per cent.—that is more than half a million fewer crimes; the biggest fall in crime since records were first collected in 1857.

The police deserve much of the credit for that success. They have revolutionised the way in which they fight crime, targeting persistent and known offenders, using the latest technology, and taking the fight to the criminal. The Conservatives are proud of the part that we played in helping to make it happen. We challenged the liberal consensus that criminals should not be held responsible for their actions. We evened up the scales of justice by putting the needs of the victim before the interests of the criminal, and we put the protection of the public at the top of our agenda.

In all this, we received little help from the Labour party. It opposed our reforms to the right to silence, it opposed giving the Attorney-General the right of appeal against lenient sentences, and it opposed stiffer sentences for the most serious offences, such as taking a gun to a crime. All those reforms have now been accepted by the Government—they have been adopted as if they were their own.

Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, but we shall soon know whether Labour's change of heart is genuine or whether it is a cheap fake. We have yet to see the details of the Government's crime and disorder legislation, but I support the broad objectives set out by the right hon. Member for Blackburn this afternoon. We want juvenile criminals to be quickly and properly punished. We want irresponsible parents to be held to account for their children's behaviour. We want action to tackle drugs.

Unlike the Labour party, we always have wanted these things. We legislated for secure training centres for persistent juvenile offenders; Labour voted against them. We gave courts the powers to make parents attend court with their children; Labour voted against them. We proposed mandatory minimum sentences for persistent burglars and dealers in hard drugs; Labour voted to wreck those measures. They will not be in the Government's Bill. I pledge today that we shall do everything we can to reinstate them.

In January, the right hon. Member for Blackburn promised that he would repeal the Asylum and Immigration Act 1996. He went so far as to boast that this would be a monument to his time as Home Secretary. He had previously denounced that Act as racist. Yet there is no mention of any such repealing legislation in the

Gracious Speech. One assumes that the Home Secretary used the word "racist" deliberately. It is not, after all, language to be used lightly. What can we infer from his reluctance now to repeal that legislation? Is it simply an oversight? Is the legislation no longer racist, perhaps? Or is this just another example of the Home Secretary's moral indignation evaporating into hot air?

One of the few consolations of Opposition—there are not many—is watching Ministers eat their words. It has not taken them very long. Not long ago, the present Home Secretary used to wax indignant about privately managed prisons. Despite the fact that Her Majesty's chief inspector was unstinting in his praise, for example, of privately run Doncaster, the Home Secretary discounts such prisons as morally repugnant. Those are strong words, but are now apparently to become a staple part of the Home Secretary's diet. Last week, he announced that he would, after all, sign any contracts that were in the pipeline for privately run prisons.

I welcome the right hon. Gentleman's conversion. Those on the Benches behind him do not look too happy about it, but I welcome it, as I welcome his conversion on so many other things: the right to silence, DNA testing, extra stop and search powers for the police. In fact, in area after area, he has modelled his policies on mine.

It has been suggested that I have something of the night about my character. It is, of course, well known in folklore that creatures of the night have no reflection, so hon. Members will understand my relief as I look across the Dispatch Box and see my reflection smiling back at me.

The Gracious Speech contains a commitment to a firearms amendment Bill. I believe that the Government's decision to ban all pistols is wrong. We passed legislation to ban all handguns from the home and to outlaw high-calibre handguns altogether, but we believe that to go further represents an unacceptable and unnecessary infringement of law-abiding people's liberties. The proposed legislation will do nothing to reduce handgun-related crime. It will force our remaining pistol shooters to give up their sport, and will debar Britain from Olympic pistol shooting for the first time since 1896.

We will oppose that vindictive measure. It does, of course, completely contradict assurances given last year by the hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson), who was in his place until just a few minutes ago. He told one of his constituents that there had, unfortunately, been some misrepresentation of Labour's position on the ownership of handguns. He wrote:

"We support a ban on the holding of handguns in residential property. People such as yourself will still be able to own handguns, but they must be kept safely under lock and key at properly run centres".

Since then, the policy has changed. To judge from the Government's early days, it is the right hon. Gentleman's outspoken colleagues—if there are any—who are now to be kept safely under lock and key at properly run centres. Incidentally, I can promise the hon. Member for Hartlepool that I have no intention of challenging him for the title of prince of darkness.

At the centre of the Government's legislative programme is a Bill to incorporate the European convention on human rights into British law. We support the convention, to which Britain was one of the first signatories. The convention helped anchor democracy

across Europe, but we are not persuaded that incorporating the convention into British law is either necessary or desirable.

Incorporation would mean that judges might find themselves having to make what are essentially political decisions. In any event, human rights in Britain are not under threat, even after the election of a Labour Government, but the sovereignty of Parliament is under threat, and incorporation of the convention would be a further blow to that sovereignty. As the Lord Chancellor has on a previous occasion admitted:

"Incorporation will involve a very significant transfer of power to the judges."

Indeed, the first few weeks of the Government's tenure have been characterised by the parcelling out of Parliament's powers to unelected bankers, unelected Brussels bureaucrats and now unelected judges. That diminishes the sovereignty of Parliament and the sovereignty of those who sent us to Parliament, and it is their power which is being whittled away.

Throughout the previous Parliament, we heard a great deal from the Labour party, and especially from the present Prime Minister and Home Secretary, about standards in public life. They never tired of telling us that it was vital that only the highest standards would suffice. They made it known that, if any allegation was made against a Labour Member, his feet would not touch the ground before he was removed. They were particularly dismissive of our contention that a man was innocent until proven guilty.

Yesterday, a Labour Member was accused of committing a criminal offence. What was the reaction of the Government Front Bench? First, there was a television interview with the Home Secretary at his most solemn and sanctimonious. Then the hon. Member for Glasgow, Govan (Mr. Sarwar) was invited to Downing street for a cosy chat. Now we read in this morning's *Times* that the Labour leadership issued a clear warning that it would consider the hon. Gentleman's suspension from the party if criminal charges are brought against him. "Consider"—goodness me, what decisive judgment.

The truth is that, while the Labour Government pretend to be able to govern the country, they cannot even govern the Labour party. It seems that they cannot even govern Govan.

Let us be clear about the challenge that faces this Parliament. We have a Government who have made many promises, and our task in opposition is to hold them to those promises. We shall support them when they act in the national interest, and we shall oppose them when they do not.

But let us never forget that this is a Government who won power by scaring pensioners into believing that their pensions would be taken from them. This is a Government who won power by terrifying the sick that their national health service would be dismantled. This is a Government who won power by suppressing every belief that brought their members into politics in the first place. That is why it is not only our duty to provide opposition but our privilege to do so. We shall provide opposition with vigour, resolve and relish.

9.29 pm

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Alun Michael): What a contrast there was between the sad effort of the former Home Secretary to look like a

leadership contender and many of the contributions made to this serious debate. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) on his opening speech, because he was gracious in defeat. I cannot imagine a more exciting challenge than my present role as deputy to my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary, nor a finer team to work with. I look forward to the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border offering constructive amendments to our positive legislation and such help as I have given him in recent years.

Conservative Members should revisit the mantra that crime has fallen dramatically in recent years. Has the shadow Home Secretary not noticed that violent crime increased by 11 per cent. last year alone? There may have been dramatic falls in some offences, such as bicycle theft, but it is patronising for the shadow Home Secretary to tell the elderly that they do not need to worry about crime, because they know the reality behind the fear and the statistics of crime. Even if the risk of attack, as the right hon. Gentleman suggested, is greater for a young man than it is for a pensioner, the risk is too high for both. That provides a political imperative for this Government. During the debate, my hon. Friends, old and new, and from every part of the country, underlined our priority to tackle crime.

There are so many hon. Members to congratulate. The hon. Member for New Forest, West (Mr. Swayne) told us of the beautiful conservation areas in his constituency. He implied that they contain endangered species: I thought that he was talking about animals, but perhaps he was referring to the rarity of a large Conservative majority. He offered a bizarre recipe for success when he encouraged hon. Members to concentrate on winning the support of convicted murderers as a way of tackling crime.

The hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Mr. Allan) gave a short and powerful speech dedicated to his constituency. My hon. Friend the Member for North-West Leicestershire (Mr. Taylor) also referred to his home area. He, like me, is a Labour and Co-operative Member of the House, and I welcome him to it. They were two of many speeches that looked beyond party loyalties to civic and local pride and a sense of community. That is the essence of what is best in the House of Commons, and the essence of the message that we must get across if we are to tackle the problems of crime and disorder.

I endorse the tribute paid by my hon. Friend the Member for Houghton and Washington, East (Mr. Kemp) to Roland Boyes, who was a former Member. He was a fine representative of his constituency and a good friend to many hon. Members on both sides of the House. My hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Mr. Linton) paid tribute to John Bowis, who has left the House. He was rare among Conservative Members in that he took an interest in the plight of the Somalis before the hidden war in the north of Somalia became a matter for press and media comment. I also pay tribute to him. My hon. Friend the Member for Battersea showed his ability to bite back when he was harassed by the hon. Member for West Worcestershire (Sir M. Spicer) in a controversial intervention.

I join my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary and the shadow Home Secretary in paying tribute to Sir Michael Shersby, whose death shocked and saddened us all. With Sir Michael, I and a few others took the first steps to establishing an all-party group on the police. The role of

[Mr. Alun Michael]

the police is central not only to catching criminals, but to the larger objective of keeping the peace and creating a decent society. We need a balanced dialogue with the police. I recall that such an approach was encouraged by the late John Smith and by the then shadow Home Secretary, now the Prime Minister, when we formed that group. Such dialogue led to my hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire (Mr. O'Brien), serving as a consultant to the Police Federation. That role was previously played by my predecessor, Lord Callaghan. I am delighted to have my hon. Friend as a colleague in the Home Office now.

This is an example of the way in which new Labour has rediscovered the art of listening. We have listened not only to the federated ranks, but to chief constables and superintendents. I suggest to Opposition Members that they will have to rediscover the art of listening, for in the past few years they have not listened to the police, they have not listened to the public and they have not listened to the anger that there is out there about the way in which crime has impacted on communities. It is dialogue of that sort that has led us to our determination to build a partnership with the police and others to tackle crime.

I was pleased to hear the comments of the hon. Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone (Mr. Maginnis), who explained that he would have to leave before the winding-up speeches. He expressed a wish to work with the Government on matters of common interest, referring particularly to the need to tackle drugs and the scourge of drug-related crime. We shall welcome his and his party's input on issues such as drugs policy, and I assure him and all parties that we shall always be prepared to listen with respect to the contribution of other hon. Members. The hon. Gentleman also raised the issue of bullying in schools and the workplace—which needs to be tackled—and issues relating to the marches in Northern Ireland, which I shall draw to the attention of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

My hon. Friend the Member for Falkirk, East (Mr. Connarty) did sterling work in Committee on legislation earlier this year. Now that Stirling is a Labour seat, we are allowed to say that. I agree with him about the importance of a ban on handguns. Like every Member of Parliament, he illustrated the importance of so many of our proposals. We all have a street here or a village there in which the atmosphere of the community has broken down into disorder. That is why the policies that we are adopting—the proposals for community safety orders; the proposals to nip things in the bud with young offenders—are so important.

We heard a maiden speech from my hon. Friend the Member for Gravesham (Mr. Pond), one of eight new Kent Members. Over the years, he has been a distinguished voice, working for equality outside Parliament. He described graphically the concern of his constituents, especially the elderly, about youth crime and disorder. Indeed, I think that he showed the appropriate balance of care and determination to tackle those problems. He has a distinguished record on low pay and poverty, but he also recognises that crime hits the poor even more than the rich, and that the two are not alternatives: both are problems in society that need to be tackled.

The hon. Member for Faversham and Mid-Kent (Mr. Rowe)—a number of Kent Members seem to have taken part in tonight's debate—referred to the return to the Home Office of responsibility for the voluntary sector. I thank him for his kind words. I found his speech entertaining, but slightly barmy. Let me make it clear that it is not for us to tell the voluntary sector what to do; our task is to nurture that sector and work with it. I assure the hon. Gentleman that, far from being inclined to be a dead hand, the Home Office welcomes back responsibilities for the voluntary sector with enthusiasm—an enthusiasm which is felt by those working in the Home Office, as well as my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary and me.

I must tell the hon. Gentleman—who is clearly developing a massive pessimism—that the reason for that is that the Home Office should not be the Department for doing nasty things to people. It should complement the work of fighting and preventing crime—and doing nasty things to those who need to have nasty things done to them—with the work of rebuilding our damaged communities, and encouraging citizenship through volunteering and voluntary action.

In his engaging way, the hon. Gentleman painted a picture of post-election Britain that I do not recognise. He seems to be suffering from some classic symptoms of depression, but I ask him to look at the faces of people in the streets since Labour won the election. What we see in their faces is a sense of relief and liberation. Far from being a dead hand of puritanism, Labour is a promise to a population who feel released by hope. People are already smiling more under a Labour Government.

Mr. Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) *rose*—

Mr. Michael: It is a pleasure to give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Duncan Smith: I congratulate the Minister on his appointment. He spoke about hope; his party was supposedly elected on the basis of great hope. One of the Government's targets is to reduce the number of people who are incarcerated. If he has not reduced that number in a year, will he resign?

Mr. Michael: Our aim is to attack crime and its causes so that there are fewer offenders and fewer victims. That is the target. Locking people up when that is necessary is a punishment and protects the public. It is an instrument to give the community the security that people have lacked during 18 years of Conservative rule. I was speaking about the positive side of rebuilding the community, but it seems that the hon. Gentleman does not want to hear about that.

The hon. Member for Faversham and Mid-Kent said, pessimistically, that he could see no way in which we could bring unemployed people back into work. He seemed hopeless on that front, but success was being achieved in the late 1970s and into the early 1980s until the destructive force of the Thatcher era destroyed hope and opportunity for young people and, incidentally, made me angry enough to stand for Parliament. In a powerful, short speech, my hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland, North (Mr. Etherington) also emphasised the need to offer hope to young people.

The hon. Member for Sevenoaks (Mr. Fallon), another Kent Member, this time a retread, seems to have learnt nothing during his enforced exile. How on earth can it be social authoritarianism at its worst—which I think were his words—to require parents to meet their responsibilities and help them to be good parents? Do not the Conservatives believe in that? He criticised the Conservative Government for the Children Act 1989 and the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991. He said that they were too centralising and state interfering. He deplored the incorporation of the European convention on human rights despite the fact that, as has been said more than once, it was written by a man who became a distinguished Conservative Lord Chancellor. The absurdity of that was highlighted by my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush (Mr. Soley) in his short but pungent intervention.

By contrast, my hon. Friend the Member for South Derbyshire (Mr. Todd) said that, in effect, he was joining a family business. He told us about his colourful predecessors, Edwina Currie and George Brown. The Chief Whip wants me to inform him that there is no need to keep up that tradition. Wearing such a lurid tie and supporting Gresley Rovers is quite enough, thank you very much.

The hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Dr. Brand) made a thoughtful speech after we ran out of Conservative Members. It is interesting to note that Conservatives who have wandered in lately do not seem to have noticed that the Conservative Benches were virtually empty during large parts of the debate and the party ran out of people who wished to contribute.

My hon. Friend the Member for Salford (Ms Blears) demonstrated her roots in her community and constituency. Hon. Member after hon. Member, and especially my hon. Friends, spoke about the problems of crime and the need to tackle them. They highlighted why this issue is so high on the new Government's agenda.

The right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) made a powerful contribution to the debate. I do not intend to go into the detail of the dispute between members of the previous Government, but the right hon. Lady acknowledged that there is a need for the relationship between Ministers to be sorted out. We take note of what she says, but I can tell the House that a significant step has already been taken by my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary, who has decided that Ministers will take responsibility for answering questions on the Prison Service instead of effectively using officials as scapegoats. I have frequently disagreed with the right hon. Lady on all sorts of issues, but no one could doubt the strength of her conviction or the seriousness of her criticism in today's debate. She criticised the waste involved in the £250,000 cost of sacking Derek Lewis. I reflect merely that local authority councillors would have been surcharged for such behaviour, but the former Home Secretary escaped penalty, at least until today.

Mr. Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): Will my hon. Friend invite the former Home Secretary to explain how he justifies spending large sums of public money on a person whom he deemed to be either lacking in competence or bad in performance, when other people—people we represent—get nothing when they are

dismissed for lack of competence or poor performance? But there is hush money to silence someone whom the former Home Secretary dismissed.

Mr. Michael: The former Home Secretary gave us no explanation of the inconsistency between the sacking and having to admit that it was wrongful dismissal, but I believe that there are many other issues for which he will still be called to account. Although we have heard his defence tonight—an opportunity that was denied Derek Lewis, as the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald made clear—the former Home Secretary did not convince the House and he will not escape the consequences of his behaviour in office.

The shadow Home Secretary made a robust defence of a position that many people may have regarded as untenable. It is for others to judge whether he succeeded. For Members of Parliament, this unseemly spat between two former Ministers distracts attention from their failure to tackle crime and its causes, from the previous Government's activities while in power and from this Government's positive and constructive programme, which is in contrast to those activities.

We have heard the shadow Home Secretary deny responsibility for so many disasters in his time as Home Secretary that the tone of today's speech comes as no surprise. He defended even Conservative central office briefings, which is a sign of desperation. He has the cheek to stand on his record. It is undeniable that he is in denial as he refights the battles he lost during the last election and during the couple of years before, just as he is in denial as he refights the battles over the sacking of Derek Lewis.

The shadow Home Secretary says that we have adopted his measures on issues such as gun control. He had the cheek to claim that he was in the lead on issues to tackle crime. Has he forgotten that he introduced the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 with no element to deal with violence in any way? It contained nothing to do with drugs, drug-related crime or weapons until Labour moved amendments. Who was the Home Secretary who had to be dragged kicking and screaming to support legislation to deal with combat knives, stalkers, people who abuse children, and people who travel abroad to abuse children?

We will take no lessons from the former Home Secretary. Over recent years, it is we who have set the agenda on law and order and he who has had to follow us. It is on his failure to tackle crime that I criticise him. He seems to believe himself to be some sort of teflon-coated reincarnation of Houdini. It is his failure on crime for which he will be remembered.

The shadow Home Secretary criticised the announcements in the Queen's Speech on the banning of all handguns, but banning all handguns will set a clear line in law on those weapons, which are portable, easy to conceal and lethal to use. That is why there is such widespread public support for the Labour party's position on the issue. I believe that our proposals will succeed on a free vote.

The shadow Home Secretary was very keen on quoting Mr. Fred Broughton, chairman of the Police Federation, when it favoured something that he said, but what did Mr. Fred Broughton say about our proposal on handguns?

"The proposal to ban the private possession of handguns is a victory for common sense. No system can guarantee to exclude every potential mass killer, but we owe it to the victims of

[Mr. Michael]

Hungerford and Dunblane to take the strongest possible action to prevent a repetition of past tragedies. We believe the public will strongly support this decisive action."

The Government believe that taking such action is right. We believe that it will be decisive, that it will have public support and that it will be supported by the House.

Mr. Julian Brazier (Canterbury): Will the Minister tell the House why he is so determined to pursue innocent people—who are participating in a sport that is endorsed by the Olympic Foundation—whereas he was so insistent on watering down the former Government's tough measures to deal with repeat burglars and repeat drug dealers?

Mr. Michael: The hon. Gentleman obviously has not listened. He was also inaccurate in his description of Labour's record. The simple fact is that the public, the police and the Government believe that—so far as it is possible to do so in legislation—drawing a clear line, which involves banning all handguns, is the safest way in which to deal with the issue.

Mr. Ian Bruce: Will the Minister tell us whether, in dealing with the issue so decisively, he will also ban rifles, shotguns and other weapon types?

Mr. Michael: Will the hon. Gentleman recall, please, that the need to tackle those issues arose because of the death of 16 children by a man using handguns that were possessed legally? The Opposition will have to answer whether they really want to resist our proposals and obstruct legislation that the police, the public and the Government believe is necessary.

Mr. Bruce: Answer the question.

Mr. Michael: I have answered the question. It is for Opposition Members and their consciences to determine how they should reply.

The shadow Home Secretary said that he supports the European convention on human rights. Why is he therefore afraid to allow British courts to apply its provisions in British courts? Why is he afraid to repatriate the convention's provisions, as we propose to do? We propose to trust British courts, instead of saying that Britons must go abroad to benefit from the provisions offered under the convention.

The right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald went beyond an attack on the former Home Secretary to make a devastating critique of lowered standards in public life. In some of her remarks, she called on my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister to end sleaze and to restore confidence in the House and in standards in public life. I assure her that neither my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister nor my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary will be found wanting on that matter when action is required.

The simple answer to the question asked by the shadow Home Secretary is that the Government's reaction to allegations about a Labour Member was simple and straightforward—to ask the police to investigate the allegations.

The right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith) said that he wished that the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald had been in the Chamber during his speech, so that he could ask her whether she had expressed to the then Prime Minister her deep and serious concerns. That question hangs in the air.

The right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed also showed my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary the respect of saying that my right hon. Friend believes what he says and that he is serious about being tough on crime. The right hon. Gentleman need not worry, because my right hon. Friend will be tough on crime, and he will be equally tough on the causes of crime. Above all, however, he will be effective. The issue will be one of what works, and the purpose will be to allow the public to be safe in their houses and on the streets. The previous Home Secretary consistently made similar statements, but my right hon. Friend means them, and he will deliver on them.

My hon. Friend the Member for Tooting (Mr. Cox) was absolutely right to highlight the terror inspired by crime in local communities. During the general election campaign, there was dissonance between the debates in the media and the comments that we heard on the doorsteps. I am sure that all my hon. Friends agree that, when we spoke to people—whether they were in Exeter, Cambridge, Birmingham, Cardiff, Colwyn Bay or the London boroughs—they were not reassured by the frenetic posturing of the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard). Their experience was different. Crime used to be something that happened to other people; now it happens to them, their families and their friends.

"Prison works" was the mantra repeated by the former Home Secretary, as my hon. Friend the Member for Falkirk, East said. Prison should work; it should hold securely the people sentenced by the courts, provide a regime that is firm but fair and return offenders to the community less likely to re-offend and more likely to be responsible citizens. The last Government failed to make prison work. Prison must be more effective. Being caught and punished must be more certain. However, prison cannot work on its own.

The increase in offending under the Conservatives was matched by a drop in the number of people being caught and punished. Let us examine the statistics: only one offence in 56 now ends in punishment by a court, and only one crime in 750 ends with a custodial sentence. Prisons cannot solve crime on their own any more than the police can fight crime on their own. That is why effective action is needed for young offenders so that crime is nipped in the bud and why a range of measures to tackle violence and intimidation is so important. It is also vital to have effective partnerships between the police and local authorities. Together—[Laughter.] Well, it would be a good thing if priests worked with them, too. The police and local authorities must work with the local community, including residents, the business community and the voluntary sector to tackle crime and its causes. Indeed, young people have a great deal to offer.

The right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border shared with me the privilege of judging the Prudential youth action awards. I am sure that he agrees that when judging those awards, it became clear that if young people are regarded as the hope of the future and as being able to contribute, they can help to tackle crime and its causes.

This is a matter for the whole of the Government, just as it is a matter for the police and local authorities. It is a matter for the whole of society because the devil makes work for idle hands. In this context, we should be aware of the relevance of opportunities for young people aged 18 to 25 and, indeed, the relevance of nursery education to our long-term efforts to tackle crime and its causes.

Let us consider the false prospectus and the flurry of absurdities in the Opposition's amendment. First, the amendment begins with the words "But humbly regret"—the shadow Home Secretary has a great deal to be humble about, but anything less humble than the shadow Home Secretary is hard to imagine. Secondly, it tries to cast doubt on our commitment to giving second-time serious violent and sexual offenders automatic life sentences. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has made it clear that we will do that later this year.

I remind the Opposition that it was my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary who first identified the scandal of sentencing that is inconsistent and fails to be progressive. We shall tackle these issues as the previous Government did not.

The third absurdity is that the amendment calls for "the reinstatement of the original provisions of that Bill"—the Crime (Sentences) Act 1997—

"to give third time burglars and dealers in hard drugs mandatory minimum sentences of three and seven years respectively—save in exceptional circumstances".

That is what the Act says now. The former Home Secretary began by brooking no exceptions and then did a U-turn, but refused repeatedly to explain his exceptions. It was most frustrating trying to draw blood from a stone. We defined the exceptions as relating to the offence or the offender or likely to be unjust. In voting for the amendment, the Opposition will be voting to be unjust. That is the ludicrous situation in which they find themselves.

Fourthly, the amendment congratulates the previous Government

"on its achievements on tackling crime and protecting the public", but that Government failed to tackle crime and protect the public. It ends with the ringing slogan that we should carefully examine the rights in the European convention.

The Government will offer the community hope and opportunity, punishment for those who offend, safer and healthier communities, a balance between rights and responsibilities and the chance of safety in the community for those who wish to live their lives safely. We shall be tough on crime and on the causes of crime and we shall build healthier communities because Britain deserves better.

Question put, That the amendment be made:—

The House divided: Ayes 151, Noes 422.

Division No. 1]

[9.59 pm

AYES

Ainsworth, Peter (<i>E Surrey</i>)	Atkinson, Peter (<i>Hexham</i>)
Amess, David	Baldry, Tony
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael	Bercow, John
Arbuthnot, James	Beresford, Sir Paul
Atkinson, David (<i>Bour'mth E</i>)	Blunt, Crispin

Body, Sir Richard	Leigh, Edward
Boswell, Tim	Letwin, Oliver
Bottomley, Peter (<i>Worthing W</i>)	Lewis, Dr Julian (<i>New Forest E</i>)
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia	Lidington, David
Brady, Graham	Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Brazier, Julian	Loughton, Tim
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter	Luff, Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela	Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
Bruce, Ian (<i>S Dorset</i>)	MacGregor, Rt Hon John
Burns, Simon	McIntosh, Miss Anne
Butterfill, John	MacKay, Andrew
Cash, William	Maclean, Rt Hon David
Chapman, Sir Sydney	Madel, Sir David
(<i>Chipping Barnet</i>)	Major, Rt Hon John
Chope, Christopher	Malins, Humphrey
Clappison, James	Maples, John
Clark, Rt Hon Alan (<i>Kensington</i>)	Mates, Michael
Clark, Dr Michael (<i>Rayleigh</i>)	Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth	Mawhinney, Rt Hon Dr Brian
(<i>Rushcliffe</i>)	May, Mrs Theresa
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey	Merchant, Piers
Collins, Tim	Nicholls, Patrick
Colvin, Michael	Norman, Archie
Cormack, Sir Patrick	Ottaway, Richard
Cran, James	Page, Richard
Curry, Rt Hon David	Paice, James
Davis, Rt Hon David (<i>Haltemprice</i>)	Paterson, Owen
Davies, Quentin	Pickles, Eric
(<i>Grantham & Stamford</i>)	Prior, David
Day, Stephen	Redwood, Rt Hon John
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen	Robathan, Andrew
Duncan, Alan	Robertson, Laurence (<i>Tewk'b'ry</i>)
Duncan Smith, Iain	Roe, Mrs Marion (<i>Broxbourne</i>)
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter	Rowe, Andrew (<i>Faversham</i>)
Evans, Nigel	Ruffley, David
Faber, David	St Aubyn, Nick
Fabricant, Michael	Sayeed, Jonathan
Fallon, Michael	Shepherd, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Flight, Howard	Shepherd, Richard (<i>Aldridge</i>)
Forth, Eric	Simpson, Keith (<i>Mid-Norfolk</i>)
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman	Soames, Nicholas
Fox, Dr Liam	Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Fraser, Christopher	Spicer, Sir Michael
Gale, Roger	Spring, Richard
Garnier, Edward	Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Gibb, Nick	Steen, Anthony
Gill, Christopher	Streeter, Gary
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl	Swayne, Desmond
Goodlad, Rt Hon Alastair	Syms, Robert
Gray, James	Tapsell, Sir Peter
Green, Damian	Taylor, Ian (<i>Esher & Walton</i>)
Greenway, John	Taylor, John M (<i>Solihull</i>)
Grieve, Dominic	Taylor, Sir Teddy
Hague, Rt Hon William	Temple-Morris, Peter
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archibald	Townend, John
Hammond, Philip	Tredinnick, David
Hawkins, Nick	Trend, Michael
Heald, Oliver	Tyrie, Andrew
Heath, Rt Hon Sir Edward	Viggers, Peter
(<i>Old Bexley & Sidcup</i>)	Walter, Robert
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David	Waterson, Nigel
Heseltine, Rt Hon Michael	Whitney, Sir Raymond
Horam, John	Whittingdale, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael	Widdicombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Howarth, Gerald (<i>Aldershot</i>)	Wilkinson, John
Hunter, Andrew	Willets, David
Jack, Rt Hon Michael	Wilshire, David
Jackson, Robert (<i>Wantage</i>)	Winterton, Nicholas (<i>Macclesfield</i>)
Jenkin, Bernard (<i>N Essex</i>)	Woodward, Shaun
Johnson Smith,	Yeo, Tim
Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey	Young, Rt Hon Sir George
Key, Robert	
King, Rt Hon Tom (<i>Bridgwater</i>)	
Kirkbride, Miss Julie	
Laing, Mrs Eleanor	
Lansley, Andrew	

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Bowen Wells and
Mr. Patrick McLoughlin.

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
 Ainger, Nick
 Ainsworth, Robert (*Cov'try NE*)
 Allen, Graham (*Nottingham N*)
 Anderson, Donald (*Swansea E*)
 Anderson, Ms Janet (*Ros'dale*)
 Armstrong, Ms Hilary
 Ashton, Joseph
 Atherton, Ms Candy
 Atkins, Ms Charlotte
 Austin, John
 Baker, Norman
 Ballard, Mrs Jackie
 Banks, Tony
 Barnes, Harry
 Barron, Kevin
 Battle, John
 Bayley, Hugh
 Beard, Nigel
 Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
 Begg, Ms Anne (*Aber'd'n S*)
 Beith, Rt Hon A J
 Bell, Stuart (*Middlesbrough*)
 Benn, Rt Hon Tony
 Bennett, Andrew F
 Benton, Joe
 Bermingham, Gerald
 Best, Harold
 Betts, Clive
 Blackman, Ms Elizabeth
 Blair, Rt Hon Tony
 Blears, Ms Hazel
 Blizard, Robert
 Blunkett, Rt Hon David
 Boateng, Paul
 Borrow, David
 Bradley, Keith (*Withington*)
 Bradley, Peter (*The Wrekin*)
 Bradshaw, Ben
 Brand, Dr Peter
 Breed, Colin
 Brinton, Ms Helen
 Brown, Rt Hon Nicholas
 (*Newcastle E & Wallsend*)
 Brown, Russell (*Dumfries*)
 Browne, Desmond (*Kilmarnock*)
 Buck, Ms Karen
 Burden, Richard
 Burgon, Colin
 Burnett, John
 Butler, Christine
 Byers, Stephen
 Cable, Dr Vincent
 Caborn, Richard
 Campbell, Alan (*Tynemouth*)
 Campbell, Mrs Anne (*C'bridge*)
 Campbell, Menzies (*NE Fife*)
 Campbell-Savours, D N
 Canavan, Dennis
 Cann, Jamie
 Caplin, Ivor
 Casale, Roger
 Caton, Martin
 Cawsey, Ian
 Chapman, Ben (*Wirral S*)
 Chaytor, David
 Chidgey, David
 Chisholm, Malcolm
 Church, Ms Judith
 Clapham, Michael
 Clark, Rt Hon Dr David (*S Shields*)
 Clark, Dr Lynda
 (*Edinburgh Pentlands*)
 Clark, Paul (*Gillingham*)
 Clarke, Charles (*Norwich S*)

Clarke, Eric (*Midlothian*)
 Clarke, Tom (*Coatbridge*)
 Clarke, Tony (*Northampton S*)
 Clelland, David
 Clwyd, Mrs Ann
 Coaker, Vernon
 Coffey, Ms Ann
 Cohen, Harry
 Coleman, Iain
 Colman, Anthony
 Connarty, Michael
 Cook, Frank (*Stockol N*)
 Cooper, Ms Yvette
 Corbett, Robin
 Corston, Ms Jean
 Cotter, Brian
 Cousins, Jim
 Cox, Tom
 Cranston, Ross
 Crausby, David
 Cryer, Mrs Ann (*Keighley*)
 Cryer, John (*Hornchurch*)
 Cummings, John
 Cunniffe, Lawrence
 Cunningham, Jim (*Cov'try S*)
 Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr John
 (*Capeland*)
 Curtis-Thomas, Ms Clare
 Dafis, Cynog
 Dalyell, Tam
 Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
 Darvill, Keith
 Davey, Edward (*Kingston*)
 Davey, Valerie (*Bristol W*)
 Davies, Rt Hon Denzil (*Llanelli*)
 Davies, Geraint (*Croydon C*)
 Davies, Rt Hon Ron (*Caerphilly*)
 Davis, Terry (*B'ham Hodge H*)
 Dawson, Hilton
 Dean, Ms Janet
 Denham, John
 Dismore, Andrew
 Dobbin, Jim
 Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
 Donohoe, Brian H
 Doran, Frank
 Drew, David
 Drown, Ms Julia
 Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
 Eagle, Ms Angela (*Wallasey*)
 Eagle, Ms Maria (*L'pool Garston*)
 Edwards, Huw
 Efford, Clive
 Ellman, Ms Louise
 Ennis, Jeff
 Etherington, Bill
 Ewing, Mrs Margaret
 Fatchett, Derek
 Fearn, Ronnie
 Field, Frank
 Fisher, Mark
 Fitzpatrick, Jim
 Fitzsimons, Ms Lorna
 Flint, Ms Caroline
 Flynn, Paul
 Follett, Ms Barbara
 Foster, Don (*Bath*)
 Foster, Michael Jabez (*Hastings*)
 Foster, Michael John (*Worcester*)
 Foulkes, George
 Fyfe, Maria
 Galloway, George
 Gapes, Mike
 Gardiner, Barry
 George, Andrew (*St Ives*)

Gerrard, Neil
 Gibson, Dr Ian
 Gilroy, Mrs Linda
 Godman, Dr Norman A
 Godsiff, Roger
 Goggins, Paul
 Golding, Mrs Lin
 Gordon, Mrs Eileen
 Gornie, Donald
 Grant, Bernie
 Griffiths, Nigel (*Edinburgh S*)
 Griffiths, Win (*Bridgend*)
 Grocott, Bruce
 Grogan, John
 Hain, Peter
 Hall, Mike (*Weaver Vale*)
 Hall, Patrick (*Bedford*)
 Hancock, Mike
 Hanson, David
 Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
 Harris, Dr Evan
 Harvey, Nick
 Heal, Mrs Sylvia
 Healey, John
 Heath, David (*Somerton*)
 Henderson, Doug (*Newcastle N*)
 Henderson, Ivan (*Harwich*)
 Hepburn, Stephen
 Heppell, John
 Hesford, Stephen
 Hewitt, Ms Patricia
 Hill, Keith
 Hinchliffe, David
 Hodge, Ms Margaret
 Home Robertson, John
 Hood, Jimmy
 Hoon, Geoffrey
 Hope, Philip
 Hopkins, Kelvin
 Howarth, Alan (*Newport E*)
 Howarth, George (*Knowsley N*)
 Howells, Dr Kim
 Hoyle, Lindsay
 Hughes, Ms Beverley
 (*Stretford & Urmston*)
 Hughes, Kevin (*Doncaster N*)
 Hughes, Simon (*Southwark N*)
 Humble, Mrs Joan
 Hurst, Alan
 Hutton, John
 Iddon, Brian
 Illsley, Eric
 Jackson, Ms Glenda (*Hampst'd*)
 Jackson, Mrs Helen (*Hillsborough*)
 Jamieson, David
 Jenkins, Brian (*Tarnworth*)
 Johnson, Miss Melanie
 (*Wetwyn Hatfield*)
 Jones, Barry (*Alyn & Deeside*)
 Jones, Ms Fiona (*Newark*)
 Jones, Helen (*Warrington N*)
 Jones, Ms Jenny
 (*Wolverh'ton SW*)
 Jones, Jon Owen (*Cardiff C*)
 Jones, Dr Lynne (*Selly Oak*)
 Jones, Martyn (*Clwyd S*)
 Jones, Nigel (*Cheltenham*)
 Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
 Keeble, Ms Sally
 Keen, Alan (*Feltham*)
 Keen, Mrs Ann (*Brentford*)
 Kelly, Ms Ruth
 Kemp, Fraser
 Kennedy, Jane (*Wavertree*)
 Khabra, Piara S
 Kidney, David

Killoyle, Peter
 King, Andy (*Rugby*)
 King, Miss Oona (*Bethnal Green*)
 Kingham, Tessa
 Kirkwood, Archy
 Kumar, Dr Ashok
 Ladyman, Dr Stephen
 Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
 Laxton, Bob
 Lepper, David
 Leslie, Christopher
 Levitt, Tom
 Lewis, Ivan (*Bury S*)
 Lewis, Terry (*Worsley*)
 Liddell, Mrs Helen
 Linton, Martin
 Livingstone, Ken
 Livsey, Richard
 Lloyd, Tony (*Manchester C*)
 Lock, David
 Love, Andy
 McAllion, John
 McAvooy, Thomas
 McCabe, Stephen
 McCafferty, Ms Christine
 McCartney, Ian (*Makerfield*)
 McDonagh, Ms Siobhain
 Macdonald, Calum
 McDonnell, John
 McGuire, Mrs Anne
 McIsaac, Ms Shona
 McKenna, Ms Rosemary
 Mackinlay, Andrew
 MacLennan, Robert
 McMaster, Gordon
 McNamara, Kevin
 McNulty, Tony
 MacShane, Denis
 Mactaggart, Fiona
 McWalter, Tony
 McWilliam, John
 Mahon, Mrs Alice
 Mallaber, Ms Judy
 Mandelson, Peter
 Marek, Dr John
 Marsden, Gordon (*Blackpool S*)
 Marsden, Paul (*Shrewsbury*)
 Marshall, David (*Shettleston*)
 Marshall, Jim (*Leicester S*)
 Marshall-Andrews, Robert
 Martlew, Eric
 Maxton, John
 Meacher, Michael
 Meale, Alan
 Merron, Ms Gillian
 Michael, Alan
 Milburn, Alan
 Miller, Andrew
 Mitchell, Austin
 Moffatt, Laura
 Moonie, Dr Lewis
 Moore, Michael
 Moran, Ms Margaret
 Morgan, Ms Julie (*Cardiff N*)
 Morgan, Rhodri (*Cardiff W*)
 Morley, Elliot
 Morris, Ms Estelle (*B'ham Yardley*)
 Morris, Rt Hon John (*Aberavon*)
 Mountford, Ms Kali
 Mudie, George
 Mullin, Chris
 Murphy, Dennis (*Wansbeck*)
 Murphy, Jim (*Eastwood*)
 Naysmith, Dr Doug
 Norris, Dan
 O'Brien, Mike (*N Warks*)

O'Brien, William (Normanton)
 O'Hara, Edward
 Olier, Bill
 O'Neill, Martin
 Opik, Lembit
 Organ, Mrs Diana
 Osborne, Mrs Sandra
 Palmer, Nick
 Pearson, Ian
 Pendry, Tom
 Perham, Ms Linda
 Pickthall, Colin
 Pike, Peter L
 Plaskitt, James
 Pollard, Kerry
 Pond, Chris
 Pope, Greg
 Pound, Stephen
 Powell, Sir Raymond
 Prentice, Ms Bridget (Lewisham E)
 Prentice, Gordon (Pendle)
 Prescott, Rt Hon John
 Primarolo, Dawn
 Prosser, Gwyn
 Purchase, Ken
 Quin, Ms Joyce (Gateshead E)
 Quinn, Lawrie (Scarborough)
 Radice, Giles
 Rammell, Bill
 Rapson, Syd
 Reed, Andrew (Loughborough)
 Reid, Dr John (Hamilton N)
 Rendel, David
 Robinson, Geoffrey (Cov'ty NW)
 Roche, Mrs Barbara
 Rogers, Allan
 Rooker, Jeff
 Rooney, Terry
 Ross, Ernie (Dundee W)
 Rowlands, Ted
 Roy, Frank
 Ruane, Chris
 Ruddock, Ms Joan
 Russell, Bob (Colchester)
 Russell, Ms Christine (Chester)
 Salmond, Alex
 Salter, Martin
 Sanders, Adrian
 Savidge, Malcolm
 Sawford, Philip
 Sedgemore, Brian
 Shaw, Jonathan
 Sheerman, Barry
 Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
 Shipley, Ms Debra
 Simpson, Alan (Nottingham S)
 Singh, Marsha
 Skinner, Dennis
 Smith, Ms Angela (Basildon)
 Smith, Rt Hon Chris (Islington S)
 Smith, Ms Jacqui (Redditch)
 Smith, John (Glamorgan)
 Smith, Lew (Blaenau Gwent)
 Snape, Peter
 Soley, Clive
 Southworth, Ms Helen

Spellar, John
 Squire, Ms Rachel
 Steinberg, Gerry
 Stevenson, George
 Stewart, Ian (Eccles)
 Stinchcombe, Paul
 Stoate, Dr Howard
 Stott, Roger
 Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
 Straw, Rt Hon Jack
 Stringer, Graham
 Stuart, Mrs Gisela (Edgbaston)
 Stunell, Andrew
 Sutcliffe, Gerry
 Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann (Dewsbury)
 Taylor, Ms Dari (Stockton S)
 Taylor, David (NW Leics)
 Taylor, Rt Hon John D (Strangford)
 Taylor, Matthew (Truro & St Austell)
 Thomas, Gareth (Clwyd W)
 Thomas, Gareth R (Harrow W)
 Timms, Stephen
 Tipping, Paddy
 Todd, Mark
 Tonge, Dr Jenny
 Toughig, Don
 Trickett, Jon
 Turner, Dennis (Wolverhampton SE)
 Turner, Desmond (Kemptown)
 Turner, Dr George (NW Norfolk)
 Twigg, Derek (Halton)
 Twigg, Stephen (Enfield)
 Tyler, Paul
 Vaz, Keith
 Vis, Rudolf
 Wallace, James
 Walley, Ms Joan
 Wareing, Robert N
 Watts, David
 Webb, Steven
 Welsh, Andrew
 White, Brian
 Whitehead, Alan
 Wicks, Malcolm
 Williams, Rt Hon Alan (Swansea W)
 Williams, Alan W (E Carmarthen)
 Williams, Mrs Betty (Conwy)
 Willis, Phil
 Wills, Michael
 Wilson, Brian
 Winnick, David
 Winterton, Ms Rosie (Doncaster C)
 Wise, Audrey
 Wood, Mike
 Woolas, Phil
 Wray, James
 Wright, Dr Tony (Cannock)
 Wright, Tony (Gt Yarmouth)
 Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
 Mr. John McFall and
 Mr. Jim Dowd.

Opencast Coal Mining

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—[Jane Kennedy.]

10.24 pm

Mr. John Healey (Wentworth): I am grateful for this opportunity to raise the concerns of Wentworth constituents about opencast coal mining, and I am particularly grateful for the chance to combine this debate with my maiden speech.

It is a great honour to be elected to represent the people of Wentworth. It is a special privilege and responsibility as it brings together a unique mix of the political and pastoral duties of a Member of Parliament. I remember words from the book of Luke:

"Everyone to whom much is given, of him much will be required".

I hope to serve in that spirit.

May I begin by paying a warm tribute to Peter Hardy? He had been a Member of this House since 1970, representing first Rother Valley, then Wentworth when the constituency was formed in 1983. "He is part of this area", an old newspaper editor once told me, "a very big part". He has been a dedicated local Member of Parliament and I am conscious that he is a hard act to follow—conscious that I can succeed him, but not replace him.

The Wentworth constituency comprises a string of communities. Many were pit-based and all still retain a strong local identity. The parishes of Bramley and Wickersley lie to the east, next door to Dalton, Thrybergh and Sunnyside, which surround the site of the old Silverwood colliery. Rawmarsh, Swinton, Brampton Bierlow and Wath-upon-Deane are our other major towns. The whole constituency now lies within the Rotherham borough, but the north also remains a proud part of the Dearne valley, with strong links to Barnsley and the town's successful football team.

The constituency's history has been closely tied to mining, a dependence which has always been a mixed blessing. The first record of coal mining in the area is at Abdy, near Wath, in 1606. It is the first record of a mining death. Twenty years ago, the constituency still had six pits employing nearly 5,000 men. At Manvers, we also had British Coal's South Yorkshire headquarters, its regional science laboratories and the largest coking plant in Europe. The last pit in the constituency, at Silverwood, was closed in 1994 after breaking all production records for two years on the trot.

In a typically British touch, however, the constituency draws its name not from coal but from the home of an 18th century aristocrat. Wentworth Woodhouse and the village of Wentworth lie on the far western edge of the constituency and were home to the first Marquis of Rockingham. It was there that the Whigs plotted the downfall of the Government of their day, although defeat was never on the scale of 1 May 1997.

Wentworth is a constituency within a county that has suffered terribly under the Tories. Since 1985, 50,000 coal and steel jobs have been lost in South Yorkshire; one in three of our young people are neither working nor training; and unemployment is the highest in the whole of the Yorkshire and Humberside region. New jobs—where they exist—are part time, poorly paid and insecure.

Question accordingly negatived.

Debate adjourned.—[Jane Kennedy.]

Debate to be resumed tomorrow.

[Mr. John Healey]

Last month, a new European Union report showed that South Yorkshire is now bottom of the prosperity league in Britain. I know that my hon. Friend the Minister shares my concern about the county's future.

That is the legacy of the old Conservative Government and the challenge for the new Labour Government. The events of 1 May lifted spirits across the constituency and throughout the country.

I am proud to be part of a party committed to govern in the interests of the many, not the few. It is right that we reflect the concerns of middle England, but our greatest responsibility as a one-nation Government is to close the widening gap between the haves and the have-nots. Our biggest challenge is to bring new opportunities to those who have been left out or overlooked.

We must not take for granted those who have stayed loyal to Labour through the dark decades. They are looking to Labour for a fresh start. They are looking to us for a fair deal. My job is to help to make sure that a change in Government brings change in the lives and prospects of people in Wentworth.

The foundations for change in the constituency are already in place. In the Dearne, we have new industrial sites from Cortonwood to Wath Manvers, we have an enterprise zone and a flagship facility in the new Dearne Valley college. Closer to Rotherham, the Retail World complex is flourishing and the Hellaby industrial estate is a model of its kind.

It is time to talk up the area. It is time to look forward. We want to bring modern industries and jobs with a future to Rotherham and the Dearne. The coal era has ended. We want to put that period behind us. That is the wider community view within which plans for opencasting in Wentworth must be understood.

I shall deal first with the specific case of New Stubbin in Rawmarsh, and then with opencasting in general.

The application of the Chesterfield-based company, Coal Contractors Ltd. to opencast at New Stubbin was rejected by Rotherham council. The company appealed and the inspector's report is due any day on the desk of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions.

New Stubbin is a beautiful bowl in the green belt, overlooked by bungalows, school playing fields and the local cemetery. It is open space next to dense residential streets. The deep mine on that site was closed 20 years ago and the area is now naturally revegetated. There is a wide variety of wildlife and the area is popular with local people for walking and picnics.

The opencast plans cover just 40 hectares, worked for four years to produce 270,000 tonnes of coal—the amount that the Selby complex can produce in little more than a week.

I support the 810 Rawmarsh residents who petitioned against the scheme going ahead. The workings will be within a couple of hundred yards of local homes. Dust, noise and blasting will cause severe disruption to local people. Heavy lorries will cause havoc on local roads such as Rawmarsh Hill, which is a busy, narrow shopping and residential street with parked cars and pedestrians.

There is a case for opencasting. Opencasting can restore derelict and contaminated land, but not at New Stubbin, where the bulk of the area is agricultural land and sports

fields, and less than a quarter is classified as the old colliery site. Opencasting can contribute to the commercial viability of deep mines through coal blending and commercial integration, but not at New Stubbin where the low sulphur, low chlorine Barnsley seam will yield a quick profit for the company and little long-term investment in the industry. Opencasting can bring new jobs to employment black spots, but not at New Stubbin where the promise of

"20 to 30 very well paid jobs for local people"

in the planning application was severely pruned by the time of the inquiry. Opencasting can bring company support for local projects, but not at New Stubbin where the

"budget of at least £50,000 . . . to support local projects"

in the application was no longer on offer at appeal.

The case of New Stubbin highlights six key problems with the opencast system at present. First, companies are coming for green-field sites, and just 10 per cent. of new applications now propose to deal with derelict or contaminated land. Secondly, there must be provision for rejecting applications where opencasting may prejudice efforts to attract other investment to the area. Thirdly, despite improvements to MPG3 in 1994, there needs to be a stronger requirement to show clear benefit to the local environment and to local communities. If local people want it, fine; but if they do not, the local councils should not be cowed by the cost of appeal from backing local residents.

Fourthly, the presumption against development in green belt areas should require all opencast applicants to prove that their scheme is compatible with green belt objectives—to keep land permanently open, to retain the attractive landscape, and to maintain land in agricultural or forestry use. Fifthly, Government research into the advantages and disadvantages of opencasting promised by a former Minister, the present hon. Member for Mole Valley (Sir P. Beresford), in the House on 5 July 1995 has still not been published. Sixthly, the proportion of all coal mined in the United Kingdom by opencast continues to increase. It was 12 per cent. in 1980, 19.5 per cent. in 1990, and more than 31 per cent. in 1995. As electricity generating contracts are renegotiated, this competition between opencast and deep mine coal can only increase and the pressure to open up new opencast sites can only intensify.

My hon. Friend the Minister knows well that many hon. Members have opencast applications in their constituencies, and that Labour's 10-point plan for opencasting commanded strong support with the public before the election. We are anxious to see action, but we appreciate the difficulties of translating a pre-election campaign into public policy post-election. However, I urge the Minister to review, and to act rapidly to change the present system—especially the operation of MPG3. I also ask him to meet those hon. Members who have a constituency concern about opencasting.

Finally, should my hon. Friend decide that primary legislation is required to strike a better balance between coal companies and the local community, there will be a large lobby of Members of Parliament ready to back him and there will be strong public support for such a move.

10.38 pm

The Minister of State, Departments of the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Richard Caborn): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth (Mr. Healey) on raising not only opencasting issues but issues affecting South Yorkshire. I am sure that many hon. Members are aware that I also have the privilege of representing that area in this place.

My hon. Friend made a powerful speech to the House on an issue which affects many up and down this country, particularly those in the north. I also congratulate him on his election as Member for Wentworth. I am sure that he will continue to make very powerful contributions in the House, as he has helped the general secretary of the Trades Union Congress to restructure the trade union movement in this country so that it is now respected across the world and is probably one of the most modern movements in western Europe. On the basis of such work, I am sure that his contributions to the House will have gravitas.

I understand the concerns of my hon. Friend and his constituents about opencast coal mining. Not only am I a fellow South Yorkshire Member of Parliament with direct experience of the issue, but, as he may know, I was Chairman of the Trade and Industry Select Committee, which produced a report on British energy policy and the market for coal. I am, therefore, well aware of the problems that can be caused by opencasting.

I should make it clear at this early stage of my speech that it would not be appropriate for me to comment on the merits or defects of any particular opencast application or appeal. That could prejudice the Secretary of State's position in his determination of any appeal that has already been made, or which may be made if a particular planning application is refused by the mineral planning authority.

Before I turn to the particular concerns that have been raised, it may be helpful if I briefly explain the background to the current planning guidance on coal mining and the policies that it contains.

As my hon. Friend may know, the current national policy guidance is contained in minerals planning guidance note 3, which deals with all coal mining in England and Wales and replaced guidance published in 1988 that dealt solely with opencast coal. That contained a strong presumption in favour of maximising opencast coal production. Following a monitoring exercise in 1992, even the previous Tory Government decided to revise the guidelines to reflect environmental concerns and the development plan-led system. That revision was, however, held up by their coal review between October 1992 and March 1993.

During the coal review, the Trade and Industry Select Committee published its report on British energy policy and the market for coal. The Committee recommended, among other things, much tougher planning guidance on opencast coal mining.

Following the outcome of the coal review, the previous Government issued "Interim Planning Guidance For Opencast Coal", which withdrew the previous strong presumption in favour of opencast coal mining dating from the 1980s. Subsequently, draft revised guidance was issued for public consultation. In the light of responses to

consultation, the reference to opencast coal mining being in the national interest was removed. The final revised guidance was published as MPG3 on 21 July 1994.

MPG3 responded to some of the concerns that were expressed during the consultation procedure. The strong presumption in favour of opencast coal was removed. The new emphasis was on the development plan-led approach. Tests of environmental acceptability had to be applied to individual projects.

The Select Committee and many of my hon. Friends can rightly claim credit for putting pressure on the previous Administration to change the whole planning guidance. The Tory free for all of the 1980s and early 1990s that had so damaged communities in the shallow coalfields had been stopped.

The new emphasis on the development plan-led approach and the importance of environmental acceptability means that decisions on land availability and use should be debated fully and openly at the local level. In principle, this offers more certainty for industry about where coal extraction is likely to be allowed, and communities where workable coal reserves exist have a clearer idea about where such activities are likely to take place and over what period.

MPG3 placed no bar on making planning applications for development in the green belts, because minerals can be worked only where they are found and are not a permanent use of land. Indeed, opencast working need not be incompatible with green belt objectives, but, like all other forms of development, applications for mineral working in the green belt must be examined particularly carefully. Development should be allowed only where the highest standards of operation and restoration can be achieved. If anything, the environmental test has to be tougher, because more can be at stake. I know that this is an area of particular interest to my hon. Friend and I shall want to look at it closely in reviewing the present approach.

Nevertheless, MPG3 does not encourage applications for green-field sites. It says that priority should be given to proposals that involve the clearance of dereliction. Operators would need to demonstrate that real benefits offsetting the disbenefits will accrue from their proposals if they wish to work sensitive green-field sites.

MPG3 gives comprehensive advice on the specific environmental impacts of opencasting and how to deal with them. These include visual impact, noise, blasting, dust, water pollution, heavy transport movements and the damage to heritage and wildlife sites. MPG3 also makes it clear that the guidance that it contains on these matters is relevant to the consideration of planning applications.

Ms Joan Walley (Stoke-on-Trent, North): My hon. Friend will know that many Members are concerned about opencasting. What sort of consultation does he envisage taking place with hon. Members who represent constituencies where opencasting takes place, in the context of getting the 10-point plan incorporated into the planning guidance?

Mr. Caborn: If my hon. Friend waits until the end of my reply, she will know exactly what I propose. That will be made clear at the end of my response, and I do not want her to leave the Chamber too early.

[Mr. Caborn]

The acceptability of individual proposals will depend on the likely environmental impact of the development and the steps taken by the developer to minimise those effects. If necessary, tough conditions can be attached to permissions and enforced by local authorities to deliver the required protection.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth and Conservative Members—there are not many in the Chamber this evening—will know that many opencast coal planning applications are now subject to a formal environmental assessment. At present, an environmental assessment is required for opencast coal mining if the particular project is judged likely to give rise to significant environmental effects. That is a judgment for the mineral planning authority in the first place.

In practice, that has usually meant that applications involving sites of 50 hectares or more have been subject to environmental assessment although the mineral planning authority must also require that assessment to take place in other cases where there are likely to be significant environmental effects. Under the revised European arrangements coming into effect in early 1999, all opencast sites of 25 hectares or more will automatically require an environmental statement.

As I have said, the present MPG3 gives detailed advice on environment impacts. To provide background information to those considering these matters, my Department has continued through its research programme to monitor the environmental effects of surface mineral workings including opencast coal mining. Research into the control of dust was published last year. Current studies are examining blasting and traffic, and we expect to publish the results later this year.

We cannot ignore the environmental problems that opencast operations can cause, and I recognise my hon. Friend's concern that the present guidance in MPG3 does not go far enough. Equally, we should recognise that opencast coal working can produce benefits through, for example, the removal of dereliction.

Other benefits can include the contribution to, or maintenance of, local, regional or national employment. Evidence presented to the Select Committee on Trade and Industry estimated that the numbers directly employed at opencast sites in 1991-92 ranged from "over 5000" to 8,000, and the number dependent on opencast mining for their livelihood at about 15,000. More recent estimates by the Coal Authority in 1996 put the figures lower at about 6,000 directly employed, and a similar number of jobs in the support, supply and contracting industries.

We should not overlook the need to provide opencast coal for blending to make deep mine coal suitable for burning in power stations, by providing coal with low moisture, volatile or chloride content, or high calorific value.

Mr. Michael Clapham (Barnsley, West and Penistone): First, I congratulate my hon. Friend on his appointment. As he was the Chairman of the Select Committee on Trade and Industry, I know that he is aware of the economic circumstances of mining. He will be aware also, bearing in mind the studies that were undertaken in 1992, that the amount of coal that is required for sweetening is considerably less than the

amount of opencast coal that is now being mined, which for the last complete year was 16.1 million tonnes. Deep mine coal amounts to 36 million tonnes. It is clear that the proportion is wrong. Does my hon. Friend agree that a considerable reduction should take place?

Mr. Caborn: My hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley, West and Penistone (Mr. Clapham) is an expert on these matters, and he is right. The figures show that we need about 9 million tonnes from opencasting in England for the sweetening process. That balance must be struck, and it must be borne in mind when we discuss these matters.

It is interesting to consider MPG3 since 1994. In 1995-96, opencast coal production accounted for about 23 per cent. of total coal production in England. During the same year—the first full year of operation of the revised MPG3—24 applications covering 5,551 hectares and 2.7 million tonnes of coal were approved by planning authorities. Seventeen applications covering 1,189 hectares and 9.3 million tonnes of coal were refused. None of the six appeals to the Secretary of State was allowed.

By contrast, in 1992-93, before the new policy was introduced, 39 applications covering a smaller 1,225 hectares extracting as much as 7.1 million tonnes were approved by planning authorities. In 1992-93, seven appeals were allowed covering a further 470 hectares and 3.6 million tonnes of coal. In other words, 11 million tonnes of opencast were approved in 1992-93 compared with just under 3 million tonnes in 1995-96. More production was allowed through on appeal in 1992-93 than was approved by mineral planning authorities in 1995-96.

I hope that my hon. Friends and other hon. Members agree that those figures show clearly that the pressure put on the then Government to change MPG3 is now working. There has been a reduction in both the number of opencast planning applications and appeals allowed since that revision.

However, I appreciate that there are still many concerns about the adverse environmental effects of opencasting both in the coalfield communities and more widely. I share those concerns. I assure the House that the Labour Government will not be complacent about the issue.

It may be that a number of those concerns can be addressed effectively within the existing planning framework. We shall carefully consider the possibilities. For example, mineral planning authorities can already attach strict and enforceable conditions to planning consents. They are constrained only by what the courts would consider relevant and reasonable.

Environmental assessments will become mandatory in 1999 for sites of more than 25 hectares, and mineral planning authorities must already require such assessments if they judge that a project is likely to have significant environmental effects. Although I cannot prejudge individual cases, I would expect environmental assessments to be the norm, not the exception. Where there is hard evidence that opencasting would prejudice other inward investment, which brings jobs to an area, that is already a material consideration which should be taken into account by the planning authorities in reaching their decision.

Planning authorities can already set strict time limits for the commencement and completion of development, and require high standards of restoration by attaching conditions to permissions. But on certain matters it may still be right to go further. I shall, therefore, look carefully at the existing guidance in MPG3, its effect on the level of opencasting and the results of the research into blasting and traffic. I intend to review urgently the present stance of MPG3 on opencast coal and to consider, with my ministerial colleagues in the Department of Trade and Industry and in Scotland and Wales, whether changes in policy are needed, both in the short and the long term.

I have taken careful note of the points made by my hon. Friend during his excellent maiden speech. I assure him and other hon. Members who are concerned about this matter that I will take those points into account, together with other representations made to me, when I come to consider, in the light of Labour's 10-point plan for opencast coal, whether any further changes are necessary to ensure even stronger protection for the environment. I have asked my officials to prepare urgently the necessary plan of action. I shall welcome any contribution from hon. Members as we undertake that review.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at six minutes to Eleven o'clock.

House of Commons

Tuesday 20 May 1997

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER in the Chair]

Member Sworn

The following Member took and subscribed the Oath
Thomas Graham, esquire, West Renfrewshire.

PRIVATE BUSINESS

PRIVATE BILLS (PROCEDURE)

Motion made,

That—

(1) the Promoters of every Private Bill which originated in this House or was brought from the House of Lords in the last Parliament shall have leave to proceed with that Bill, if they think fit, in the present Session;

(2) every such Bill which originated in this House shall be presented to the House not later than the fifth day on which the House sits after this day;

(3) there shall be deposited with every Bill so presented a declaration signed by the Agent for the Bill, stating that the Bill is the same, in every respect, as the Bill at the last stage of its proceedings in this House in the last Parliament;

(4) every Bill so presented shall be laid by one of the Clerks in the Private Bill Office on the Table of the House on the next meeting of the House after the day on which the Bill was presented;

(5) every Bill so laid on the Table shall be deemed to have been read the first time and (if the Bill had been read a second time in the last Parliament) to have been read a second time and—

(i) if such Bill had been referred to the Committee on Unopposed Bills in the last Parliament, it shall stand so referred;

(ii) if such Bill had been referred to a Committee during the last Parliament and not reported by that Committee to the House, the Bill shall stand committed and—

(a) all Petitions against the Bill which stood referred to the Committee on the Bill shall stand referred to the Committee on the Bill in the present Session, subject to the determination of any outstanding objection to the locus standi of any petitioner; and

(b) any minutes of evidence taken before the Committee on the Bill shall stand referred to the Committee on the Bill in the present Session;

(iii) if such Bill had been reported by any Committee, it shall be ordered to be read the third time unless it had been reported with Amendments in the last Parliament and had not been considered as so amended, in which case it shall be ordered to lie upon the Table;

(iv) if such Bill had been read the third time in the last Parliament, it shall be deemed to have been read the third time;

(6) paragraph (2) of Standing Order 166 relating to Private Business (First reading) shall not apply to any Bill brought from the House of Lords in the present Session and to which this Order relates;

(7) when any Bill which was brought from the House of Lords in the last Parliament and to which this Order relates is brought from the House of Lords in the present Session, the Agent for the Bill shall deposit in the Private Bill Office a declaration, signed by him, stating that the Bill is the same, in every respect, as the Bill which was brought from the House of Lords in the last Parliament and, as soon as a certificate by one of the Clerks in the Private Bill Office that such a declaration has been so deposited has been laid upon the Table of the House—

(i) unless the Examiner had reported pursuant to Standing Order 74 relating to Private Business (Examination of bills brought from the House of Lords, etc.), the Bill shall stand referred to the Examiners;

(ii) if the Examiner had so reported, the Bill shall be ordered to be read a second time, or, if it had been read a second time, it shall be read a second time and committed; but

(iii) if the Bill had been reported by a Committee with Amendments in the last Parliament it shall be committed to the Chairman of Ways and Means who shall make only such Amendments to the Bill as had been made thereto by the Committee in the last Parliament, and shall report the Bill to the House forthwith, and the Bill shall be ordered to lie upon the Table;

(8) any Bill which under the provisions of this Order is deemed to have been read the first time, or the first and second time, or the first, second and third time, shall be recorded in the Journal of the House as having been so read;

(9) without prejudice to the provisions of paragraph (5) of this Order, only those Petitions against any Bill which stood referred to the Committee on the Bill and which had not been withdrawn or had been deposited pursuant to paragraph (b) of Standing Order 126 relating to Private Business (Reference to committee of petitions against bill) shall stand referred to the Committee on the same Bill in the present Session;

(10) in relation to any Bill to which this Order applies Standing Order 127 relating to Private Business (Right of audience before committees on opposed bills) shall have effect as if the words "under Standing Order 126 (Reference to committee of petitions against bill)" were omitted;

(11) where any Standing Order had been dispensed with in respect of any private Bill in the last Parliament, those Standing Orders shall be deemed to have been ordered to be dispensed with in respect of any such Bill presented or brought from the Lords in pursuance of this Order;

(12) any Standing Orders complied with in respect of any Bill originating in the House of Lords to which this Order relates shall be deemed to have been complied with in respect of such Bill if the same is brought from the House of Lords in the present Session, and any notices published or given and any deposits made in respect of such Bill in the last Parliament shall be held to have been published, given and made, respectively, for the Bill so brought from the House of Lords in the present Session;

(13) no further fees shall be charged in respect of proceedings on a Bill in respect of which fees have been incurred in the last Parliament.

That this Order be a Standing Order of the House.—[*The Chairman of Ways and Means.*]

Hon. Members: Object.

To be considered on Tuesday 3 June.

Oral Answers to Questions

HEALTH

Health Service Funding

1. Mr. Nicholas Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on his Department's funding priorities for the future of the NHS. [272]

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr. Frank Dobson): We are committed to raise spending on the national health service in real terms every year. We intend to ensure that every pound spent in the NHS provides maximum benefit to patients. That is why we are determined to end the internal market introduced by the previous Government, which has proved enormously expensive as well as unfair to patients and repugnant to members of both the medical and nursing professions.

Mr. Winterton: I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on his appointment to one of the most important portfolios in the Government and I genuinely wish him well. I am sure he realises my total commitment to the health service in all the years that I have been a Member of Parliament. Will he therefore indicate whether he believes that the Government will be able to equal the 75 per cent. additional resources above inflation achieved by the last Government if they take into account the increasing needs of the elderly and the tremendous opportunities for the health service arising from the advancement of medical science and technology?

Mr. Dobson: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind words and pay tribute to the way in which he has always stuck to for the national health service, especially when he was Chairman of the Select Committee on Health. I can tell him that we are determined to end the endless reorganisations on which previous Governments have insisted, which have consumed vast amounts of resources and forced hard-working people in the NHS to reapply for their own jobs. We are determined to end the paper chase that the present system has introduced and to ensure that the resources that Parliament has voted are deployed to help patients rather than to bolster a bureaucracy.

Ms Abbott: When he considers his funding priorities for the health service, will my right hon. Friend take into account strong feelings in Hackney about the future of Bart's hospital, especially those about the Queen Elizabeth II children's hospital? As things stand, the Queen Elizabeth II may be closed before replacement facilities are fully on stream. Will he bear in mind local feeling?

Mr. Dobson: I will always bear in mind local feelings. I have already been approached by innumerable hon. Members on both sides of the House about local feelings about their local hospitals. We shall not be able to oblige everyone, but I can assure my hon. Friend that when we promised a review of health services in London, we meant that that would be a real review; it will not simply endorse the decisions of the previous Government.

Mr. Simon Hughes: The Secretary of State knows that I warmly welcome him and his team to their

responsibilities, and I warmly welcome their commitment to reduce the waiting list by 100,000 as a first step. Will a test of the success of this Administration be that that target is met in the next 12 months; and, if not by then, by when?

Mr. Dobson: Our commitment was, first, to reduce spending on bureaucracy in the health service. We have instructed the chief executive of the health service, and he has accepted the instruction, to reduce spending on administration by £100 million in the current financial year. That money will be deployed in helping people on the waiting list and, specifically, in reducing the waiting list for cancer treatment. Beyond that, I am never going to stand at the Dispatch Box and make promises that I am not sure that I can keep.

Mr. Dorrell: Set a deadline.

Mr. Dobson: I am being barracked by the Secretary of State—[Laughter.]—the Secretary of State who left us with an inheritance of lengthening waiting lists, increasing waiting times, 36 health authorities in debt, 111 health trusts in debt, a shortage of nurses and a shortage of doctors; and he asks me to start setting artificial deadlines. What a cheek.

Audrey Wise: While I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his appointment, may I recommend that he considers the recent Select Committee reports on children's health, which contained many helpful suggestions, and urge him to ensure that we improve the care given to sick children, especially in relation to the availability of qualified children's nurses for home care?

Mr. Dobson: I can give that undertaking. We are keen to do all we can to implement the Select Committee's recommendations about children's health.

Mr. Horam: On the promises that the right hon. Gentleman might keep, does he recall that the Labour party made a specific promise to eliminate mixed-sex wards? Does he have a plan to do that? Will he publish the plan and, if so, when?

Mr. Dobson: I understand that the Government who have just left office promised to get rid of mixed-sex wards. We have made inquiries about the progress that has been made. As far as we can see, under the programme that they left us with, in very many hospitals there was no possibility of eliminating mixed-sex wards in the 20th century. We will speed up that process.

Health Deprivation

2. Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the degree of health deprivation in the United Kingdom. [405]

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Ms Tessa Jowell): Social class inequalities in enjoyment of good health exist from cradle to grave and are compounded by inequalities relating to ethnic background, gender and region. A child born to parents in social class V can expect to live seven years less, on average, than a child born to parents in social class I.

The Government are not prepared to tolerate that degree of inequality, which is why, as promised in our manifesto, we have put improving the nation's health at the heart of our agenda in government.

Mr. Smith: Would my hon. Friend care to comment on recent Government statistics showing that, in my constituency, we have some of the lowest income levels in the United Kingdom and some of the worst health problems—41 per cent. of families having a member who is long-term sick or disabled? What is the Government's strategy and policy to respond positively to that problem of health deprivation in communities such as Blaenau Gwent?

Ms Jowell: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. We aim to tackle poverty and inequality through our commitment to helping people move from welfare to work, to ending poverty pay by introducing a national minimum wage, and to improving housing conditions by the phased release of local authority capital receipts. Improving the health of our nation and tackling the legacy of inequality are not just matters for the Department of Health but a job to be confronted across government—and it will be.

Mrs. Marion Roe: As a former Chairman of the Health Committee, I should like to congratulate the Minister and her team on their appointments and to wish them well.

Has the Minister yet had time to study the Department of Health's statistics on the quality of health outcomes in the United Kingdom, such as the dramatic fall in perinatal mortality? Is it not true that, after 18 years of Conservative government, Britain is a much healthier country than it was in 1979?

Ms Jowell: All the figures tell a story of endemic inequality. Babies in poorer families are more likely to die in the first month of life than babies from better-off families. That is why our policy for attacking inequality and its root causes involves a strategy for improving the nation's health to be pursued across all aspects of government.

Mid-Staffordshire General Hospitals NHS Trust

3. Dr. Tony Wright: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the financial position of Mid-Staffordshire General Hospitals NHS trust. [406]

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. Alan Milburn): Latest reports from the trust indicate that it met all its financial duties in 1996-97. The initial plans for 1997-98 show a small deficit; however, the trust is confident that it will regain financial balance in the medium term.

Dr. Wright: I am grateful for that answer, and I congratulate my hon. Friend on his appointment. Will he take a particular interest in the affairs of the Mid-Staffordshire General Hospitals NHS trust? In the past few weeks, the chief executive has resigned and the contract for operating theatres at Cannock Chase hospital—largely paid for by the League of Friends—has collapsed. Furthermore, there has been an attempt to deal

with the overspend by attacking front-line services instead of attacking the bureaucracy of the internal market. Will my hon. Friend ensure that the people of Cannock Chase see that our priorities are now in place?

Mr. Milburn: I can assure my hon. Friend that I will be keeping a close eye on the performance of the trust. I understand that the matter of the operating theatre is now in the hands of the trust's solicitors, but that the trust has re-tendered the contract and is fully committed to building the operating theatre.

I think that my hon. Friend will shortly see that our priorities are markedly different from those of the former Government, not least because we want NHS resources to go to front-line patient services.

St. George's Hospital, Tooting

4. Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to visit St. George's hospital, Tooting to discuss future funding; and if he will make a statement. [407]

Mr. Dobson: My ministerial colleagues and I will be visiting a large number of hospitals over the coming months. This may well include St. George's. We want to learn at first hand how all the hospitals have been badly affected by the policies of the previous Government, and to make sure that their experience informs the changes that we intend to make.

Mr. Cox: I congratulate my right hon. Friend and his team on their appointments, and I note his reply to my question. When he comes to St. George's, he will learn a great deal. Some of our wards are closed, and earlier this month more than 30 members of staff were made redundant because there is no money to pay them or to keep the wards open. That is what my right hon. Friend inherits in one of London's major hospitals.

I am sure that the general public realise that we intend to rebuild the health service. Now we must show the loyal people who have worked in it through difficult years that we in turn are wholly committed to them—the members of staff at the hospital will welcome that.

Mr. Dobson: I agree entirely with my hon. Friend. In the brief period that I have been Secretary of State I have found much enthusiasm among the hard-working people in the health service, who have kept it going during the past 18 years, for the election of the Labour Government and a willingness to recognise that the problems are so enormous that they cannot be put right overnight. The inheritance that my hon. Friend has described at St. George's applies to virtually every hospital and every health authority.

Dorset Health Authority

5. Mr. Ian Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of the number of administrative and management staff who will need to be made redundant in Dorset health authority to reduce management costs to the Government target level. [408]

Mr. Milburn: We are in the process of developing our strategy to maximise the proportion of NHS resources devoted to patient care.

Mr. Bruce: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his thoughtful answer, but will he address the question that I

asked him? As an example, may I tell him that Dorset Community NHS trust is trying to cut £200,000 off its budget to get down to the administration target that was set by the previous Government? The present Government will be asking for £1 million to come out. How will that affect administrative staff? Will not it mean hundreds of people losing their jobs?

Mr. Milburn: If I were the hon. Gentleman, I would exercise a bit of caution about lecturing Labour Members on bureaucracy, because his party left the NHS with 20,000 more managers and 50,000 fewer nurses. Our priority is to ensure that NHS staff are in the business of treating patients, not chasing contracts. That is our priority and it is the public's priority.

Mr. Barry Jones: Does my hon. Friend intend to increase the number of nurses in hospital wards?

Madam Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman knows better. The substantive question deals with Dorset health authority.

GP Fundholding

6. Mr. Colvin: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what percentage of general practitioners are now fundholders. [409]

Mr. Dobson: As of 1 April 1997, 56 per cent. of general practitioners were members of fundholding schemes.

Mr. Colvin: I congratulate the Secretary of State on his appointment. His answer shows that more than half of all NHS patients are treated by GPs who are fundholders. If, for ideological reasons, the Government intend to scrap those arrangements, which enable doctors to back their professional judgment with hard cash, which I am sure the late Nye Bevan would have approved of, what alternative arrangement does the Secretary of State intend to propose?

Mr. Dobson: What I can say is that we have taken immediate action to start to reduce the unfairness and bureaucracy of the existing two-tier system. We are determined that non-fundholding practices, and patients from them, should no longer be at a disadvantage. Looking further ahead, I am inviting the representative bodies and others in the NHS to join us in developing and testing alternative primary care-led models of commissioning, based on the principles of fairness and meeting local needs. To create breathing space for that process of genuine exploration and debate, I can announce today that I propose to defer all further entries to the eighth wave of GP fundholding.

Mr. Sheerman: May I congratulate my right hon. Friend and his new team on their appointment, and congratulate him also on what he has just said? My constituents are more worried about the quality of GP care than whether they are a fundholder. As a matter of priority, will my right hon. Friend do something about single-person practitioners, who are so often linked to inefficiency and bad service to constituents?

Mr. Dobson: There is a general feeling that single-handed practitioners are not the best arrangement

but, certainly in some regions, there are single-handed practitioners who do a very good job. There is of course occasionally the odd large partnership that does not do a particularly good job, but we are determined to find, from pilot schemes throughout the country, new methods of commissioning health care, to consider those pilot schemes, to assess their outcome and then—and only then—to start full-scale change throughout the country. We do not, like the previous Government, intend a wholesale, revolutionary change of the NHS without trying it out first.

Mr. Dorrell: I join those who have offered the right hon. Gentleman their good wishes in his new responsibilities. In answer to an earlier question, he said that the new Government do not intend to launch into a major further reorganisation of the health service. Will he apply that principle to GP fundholding? Can he confirm that the majority of Britain's GPs, who have chosen fundholding, have chosen it because they think that that is the best way of delivering NHS care to their patients? Can he give the House and Britain's GPs the assurance that if those GPs continue to believe that that is the best way of delivering NHS care to their patients, he will leave that option open to them, or is it his policy to compel those GPs to surrender fundholding against their will, despite the fact that in their view their fundholding status is the best means of delivering NHS care to their patients?

Mr. Dobson: We are determined to ensure that all patients are treated on the basis of their clinical need, not the status of their general practitioner. That is not the case at present, and we are discussing with the medical profession and the other professions a commissioning approach in which all GPs and other health professionals in each locality can commission a service. The former Secretary of State for Health should get himself up to date. My hon. Friend the Minister of State, the Member for Darlington (Mr. Milburn), like me, has met a number of doctors over the past few days. Today he met representatives of the National Association of Fund Holding Practices and of the general medical services committee of the British Medical Association. They seem to be satisfied with what we are proposing.

Health Authority Deficits

7. Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what proposals he has for funding the deficits of health authorities. [410]

Mr. Milburn: Health authorities are expected to produce balanced income and expenditure plans, and have a statutory duty to ensure that net expenditure does not exceed their allocated cash limit.

Mr. Mitchell: I congratulate my hon. Friend on his appointment. I am sure that he will agree that the deficits are the results of a malign process carried out by the previous Government—efficiency savings that amounted to a process of anorexia, which forced bed closures, dismissal of nurses and growing waiting lists. The electorate voted on 1 May to end all that. I hope that my hon. Friend will agree that it should be an early priority to fund the deficits as soon as possible so that the wasting process can be stopped.

Mr. Milburn: My hon. Friend is right about one thing: we want more money to go into front-line patient services.

He is also right that we were elected on a manifesto commitment to stay within departmental spending targets, and we will do that. If the former Secretary of State can contain himself—I know that he is busy electioneering—I shall continue. We will address the issue of bureaucracy in the national health service, undertake a comprehensive spending review in the Department of Health to ensure that waste and inefficiency are cut out, and deal with the sort of problems that my hon. Friend raises.

Rev. W. Martin Smyth: While I welcome the Minister to his position, may I remind him that the health service is a national health service? Perhaps the Department got the figures wrong at times when it allocated funds to various authorities. Will he have a discussion with his colleague in Northern Ireland, where mythological money was taken from the health service to go into security? As a result, one of the areas at greatest disadvantage in health care has been punished again. Health authorities in Northern Ireland cannot meet their budgets.

Mr. Milburn: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. I have it in mind to open discussions about some of those issues with my hon. Friends not just in Northern Ireland, but in Wales and Scotland. I also give him an undertaking that we shall consider how resources for both primary and secondary care are distributed to ensure that they fully reflect the health needs of local populations.

Mrs. Anne Campbell: I welcome my hon. Friend to his new position. Is he aware that, to avoid a deficit in funding, the Cambridge and Huntingdon health authority has decided to cut £300,000 from its health visitor service? Does he agree that that is bad news for the early detection of health problems, bad news for the health of schoolchildren who will be affected by the cut, and very bad news for all of my constituents? Will he investigate the matter?

Mr. Milburn: Yes.

Mrs. Browning: The wages bill is the biggest pull on resources in the national health service. What assessment has the hon. Gentleman made of the additional resources required for his minimum wage policy in the NHS?

Mr. Milburn: I would exercise a little caution if I were the hon. Lady, because the Government in which she served stopped collecting the appropriate pay figures for the national health service.

Multiple Sclerosis

8. Mrs. Helen Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what drugs are available on the national health service for the treatment of multiple sclerosis. [411]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Mr. Paul Boateng): Two beta-interferon drugs are currently licensed for the treatment of multiple sclerosis and are available on the national health service. A wide range of drugs is available on the NHS to help alleviate the symptoms caused by the disease.

Mrs. Jackson: I welcome my hon. Friend to his new position. Is he aware of the great disparity between health

authorities regarding the availability of those remedies to people suffering from multiple sclerosis? That causes immense distress to sufferers and their families who know that remedies are available that might slow down the progress of the disease but who are told by their local health authorities that the remedies are not available. Will my hon. Friend take action to ensure that health authorities make such remedies available on the basis of effectiveness and need rather than on the basis of resources or cost?

Mr. Boateng: I thank my hon. Friend for her kind sentiments and for her important question. She will know—the MS Society has made it clear—that there is limited use of those drugs only in relation to some patients. Therefore, the Department considered it appropriate to issue guidelines that preserve a degree of local and clinical discretion in that area. We shall undertake to ensure that those guidelines are applied properly. I have also asked for a report on the way in which health authorities are implementing the guidelines.

Waiting Lists

10. Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps he is taking to reduce hospital waiting lists. [413]

Ms Jowell: We will reduce the bureaucratic costs of the national health service, and the savings achieved will be used to improve direct patient care by reducing waiting lists for NHS patients. Our commitment is to end waiting periods for cancer surgery and, in particular, to speed up diagnosis and treatment for patients with breast cancer.

Mr. Boswell: I welcome the hon. Lady and her team to their onerous responsibilities. She will know that our constituents have recently expressed their grave concerns about the implications of the explosion in demand for health services. Given the fact that the new Government have no proposals for enhancing NHS funding and—to put it charitably—their restructuring proposals are unlikely to do anything to reduce bureaucracy, but may well increase it, how do she and her colleagues feel about sitting there fiddling like Nero while waiting lists expand further?

Ms Jowell: People throughout the country voted two weeks ago for a Government who would spend more in every pound on patient care rather than on the bureaucracy created by the discredited Government who have just left office. The Conservatives have left our Government with a waiting list situation that is set to get even worse. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman can apologise to his constituents for a legacy of complacency and neglect that will affect patients on waiting lists for a very long time.

Figures for the quarter ending in December showed the highest ever number of people on waiting lists, and they are waiting for longer periods—that is the measure by which our predecessors used to vaunt their great successes. Indications from the service in January and February show that the situation is worsening, with longer queues and lengthening waiting periods. Provisional figures for the quarter to the end of March will be published on Thursday. We will not take any lessons from

the previous Government on how to keep promises to patients and rebuild confidence in our national health service.

Mr. Stevenson: Is my hon. Friend aware that in North Staffordshire, in crucial areas of treatment, waiting lists are increasing? When considering this important area of national health service policy, will she take into account health authorities such as North Staffordshire which have consistently been denied the resources that the Department of Health says that they should have to meet their targets?

Ms Jowell: My hon. Friend expresses a widespread concern. His constituents will wish to ensure that the health care that they receive is being funded by resources that are being used to maximum effect for patient care. That is why our commitment to reduce the amount spent on bureaucracy and to increase the amount spent on patient care will be an important benefit and, no doubt, will be welcomed by my hon. Friend's constituents.

The last quarter's available figures for waiting lists showed a fivefold increase in the number of patients who had waited for treatment for more than a year.

Mr. Dorrell: During the election campaign the Labour party made a specific commitment that 100,000 patients would be taken off the waiting list. However, the Secretary of State refused to tell the Liberal Democrat spokesman when that pledge would be delivered. Will the Minister of State now tell the House when it will be delivered?

Ms Jowell: It certainly will not be delivered this Thursday, when the last quarter's figures for waiting lists under the previous Government will show increased lists and an increased number of patients waiting for more than one year. The Conservative Government, who have only recently left office, broke every promise that they made to patients about waiting lists. We shall make promises to patients about waiting lists and we shall keep them.

Mr. Wigley: I welcome the commitment given by the Minister and by the Secretary of State to improve the position for cancer sufferers, but is the hon. Lady aware that some hospitals—such as the district general hospital which serves my area—have capital sums available for improving cancer facilities which are not being brought on stream due to lack of revenue to ensure that the facilities can be fully operated? In deciding priorities, will the Minister ensure that opportunities of the sort that I have mentioned are taken up fully so that those waiting for cancer services are not denied them?

Ms Jowell: Our pledge to patients waiting for cancer treatment was made absolutely clear. I am sure that I or my colleagues would be happy to talk to the hon. Gentleman about specific circumstances in his constituency. Our determination is to ensure that wherever a patient with a diagnosis of cancer lives, the treatment that they receive is of the highest possible standard. We are in support of the Calman/Hine proposals, which are being introduced throughout the country. They provide a measure against which to judge quality of treatment and early diagnosis, which are so important in securing long-term survival and, wherever possible, recovery from cancer.

NHS Network

11. Mr. Ian Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what support he will be giving to the use of the NHS network for education of children in hospital. [414]

Mr. Boateng: We are fully in support of initiatives to improve access to education resources for children whilst they are in hospital, and aware of the NHS network's potential to make a significant contribution to this process.

Mr. Taylor: In welcoming the hon. Gentleman to the Dispatch Box, I have to say that in opposition Labour showed no interest in the remarkable plans for the express link-up hospital project run by the redoubtable Pat Ryan. In April, when I opened the national network for the education of children in hospital, Labour had paid no attention. May I urge the Minister to pay close attention to express link-up and to realise the world-leading position that we can secure as a result of the NHS network built up under the previous Government?

Mr. Boateng: On the contrary: far from showing no interest in the Internet, it was the Labour party that proposed a national grid for learning. In implementing our proposals with regard to the NHS link, however, we must recognise that it is very important to ensure that there are safety controls on the network in hospital to prevent children tuning in to some of the ghoulies and nasties which are to be found not only on the Conservative Benches but in the system itself.

"The Health of the Nation" Targets

12. Mr. Rhodri Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what proposals he has to publish new "The Health of the Nation" targets. [415]

Ms Jowell: We intend to implement our manifesto commitment to set new goals for improving the health of the nation which recognise the range of factors that affect health, including the impact of poverty, poor housing, unemployment and a polluted environment.

Mr. Morgan: I welcome the new Minister to her post and thank her for her reply. I also welcome the announcement about the ban on tobacco advertising and sponsorship, but how will that relate to the new "The Health of the Nation" targets, given that the previous targets have gone the wrong way as regards teenage smoking and obesity? What will the Government do about life style-related "The Health of the Nation" targets such as obesity and teenage smoking? Will they drop the idea of such targets or find more practical ways of implementing them than were ever achieved by the previous Government in 18 years?

Ms Jowell: We are very concerned about the failure to achieve progress in important areas, especially in the existing "The Health of the Nation" targets, and particularly in relation to obesity and teenage smoking, the failure of which perpetuates inequality. Meeting our manifesto commitment to attack inequality at its roots needs more than just targets: it needs co-operation across Government to tackle the many factors involved which, as I have said, include poverty, poor housing,

unemployment and a polluted environment. Reducing unemployment will make a major contribution to improving the health of people throughout this country.

Sir Peter Emery: First, I must declare that I am chairman of the National Asthma Campaign. The hon. Lady will know that the target in relation to asthma in the national health structure was included for Scotland but not for England. The previous Government gave every undertaking to see whether it could be introduced in the new target. Will the hon. Lady give an assurance to the 3 million asthmatics in this country that the Government will continue to do as much as the previous Government did to assist asthma sufferers?

Ms Jowell: With great respect, it would be hard to do less. We want more than just a target to reduce asthma. We want effective action to reduce asthma which, as the right hon. Gentleman will know, is one of the major reasons why about one in 10 children miss so much of their education. I shall shortly be meeting the National Asthma Campaign to discuss specifically how we can bring forward proposals to improve the support and treatment of the increasing number of children who suffer from asthma.

Dental Services

13. Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to increase the number of NHS dentists. [416]

Mr. Milburn: This area is currently under review. Our main objective is to ensure that a comprehensive NHS dentistry service is available to all who wish to use it.

Mr. Prentice: I thank the Minister for that reply, which I found encouraging. May I remind him, however, that my area—Burnley, Pendle and Rossendale—has the worst dental health in England? The town of Barnoldswick, where I live, should have four NHS dentists but actually has only two and the figure is shortly to go down to one. That one dentist, Paul Hadfield, stopped taking NHS adult patients on 7 April. No one, not even the former Secretary of State for Health, could blame the present calamitous situation on the current Government, but I hope that the Minister will work energetically to do something about this dental desert in north-east Lancashire.

Mr. Milburn: I am aware of some of the problems in my hon. Friend's constituency, and not just in the areas that he has described. There are particular problems with treatment waiting times in towns such as Nelson, Burnley and Colne, which give us all cause for concern. As my hon. Friend will know, some resources are available to tackle such issues and I am considering how best to target them effectively.

Mr. Fabricant: As a former Treasury spokesman, the hon. Gentleman will be aware that his commitment will cost the economy and his Department money. In the light of that, does the hon. Gentleman agree with the candid comments made by the present Foreign Secretary when he was shadow Secretary of State for Health that a minimum wage would cost the health service £500 million? Was he right or was he wrong—yes or no?

Mr. Milburn: On the subject of NHS dentistry, I shall shortly be taking decisions on how best to use resources

available to us under the access fund and on whether to press ahead with new dentistry pilots under the National Health Service (Primary Care) Act 1997 to ensure that dental services are sensitive to local circumstances.

Mr. Maxton: All Labour Members want to see more dentists working exclusively in the NHS, but does not the best way to achieve a dramatic improvement in the long-term dental health of the British people lie in ensuring that young people in their formative years receive the necessary intake of fluoride? Does my hon. Friend intend to hold urgent talks with health authorities and water companies to ensure that fluoride is added to the public water supply where necessary?

Mr. Milburn: There is much to commend water fluoridation in terms of its efficiency and effectiveness in tackling oral health problems. It is also an economical solution to such problems. I can promise my hon. Friend that I shall hold early discussions with the Minister responsible for public health on how best to deal with such issues.

Mental Illness

14. Mr. Grieve: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what proposals he has to overcome the stigma attached to mental illness; and if he will make a statement. [417]

Mr. Boateng: The Department recognises the need to increase knowledge and understanding about mental health among the general public and thus to promote a positive image of mental health and combat stigma. We are actively working, not least with the voluntary sector and other groups, to take this forward.

Mr. Grieve: I welcome the hon. Gentleman to his appointment, having had the opportunity to debate with him outside the Chamber on many happy occasions in the past.

In view of the hon. Gentleman's answer, is it not a trifle disappointing that the Labour party manifesto contained no discussion of mental health problems? Are we to assume that the alleged £100 million saving from cutting bureaucracy will or will not be channelled towards mental health? I note that the criteria laid down under the new patients charter being proposed by the Government look at the success of treatments which, by its very nature, is an extremely fugitive concept when dealing with mental health problems. Are we to take it, therefore, that further funding will be made available for mental health, or not?

Mr. Boateng: No Member representing the Conservative party—which neglected mental health for 18 years and created a situation in which the vulnerable and the severely disadvantaged were let loose in our towns and cities without adequate support—has any right to point the finger at the present Government in that regard. I assure the hon. Gentleman that the Government will ensure that mental health receives the priority that it so richly deserves and which it so singularly lacked under the previous Administration.

Dr. Godman: The stigma attached to mental illness is, thankfully, much reduced from what it was. In seeking

to reduce that stigma still further, will my hon. Friend commission an investigation into the methodology of treatment for certain mental illnesses? For instance, will he examine the guidelines laid down by the Royal College of Psychiatrists on the use of electro-convulsive therapy in the treatment of certain illnesses?

Mr. Boateng: I thank my hon. Friend for that question and for his interest in the subject. We shall certainly be meeting representatives of the Royal College of Psychiatrists to discuss a range of issues, and the issue raised by my hon. Friend will certainly be among them.

Mrs. Ewing: Will the Minister look at one particularly important aspect—the fact that those who suffer from long-term mental illness and require prescriptions do not enjoy the exemptions that apply to others? Will he do that without delay?

Mr. Boateng: We shall certainly do so, among a raft of other measures, in conjunction with trusts and, importantly, local authorities. All too often, vulnerable people suffering from mental illness fall between the national health service and local authorities. We shall be addressing the issue as a matter of urgency.

Mr. Burns: On a personal note, I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on what is probably one of the most interesting and challenging portfolios in the Government. Is he aware that the previous Government had agreed a clear set of objectives with each individual health authority with regard to the provision and enhancement of mental health care to be achieved by the end of March this year? Will he confirm that his Government will continue that policy and will publish the results of the review of the performance of health authorities against their target objectives?

Mr. Boateng: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind words. The Government put the highest possible emphasis on ensuring that we build effective and cost-effective interventions both by health authorities and, importantly, by local authorities. The hon. Gentleman will know that there are real problems throughout social services and mental health care in terms of gauging value for money. I have begun a series of discussions with the Local Government Association and the national health service to determine that we get it right. We shall certainly make it a priority to publish the results, as taxpayers should know that they are getting value for money in those essential services.

Private Finance Initiative

15. **Mr. Letwin:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement about his plans for the private finance initiative in the NHS. [418]

Mr. Dobson: Five years ago, the Tory Government declared their plans to get private finance to fund hospital building projects. Five years later, however—if you will excuse the expression, Madam Speaker—not a sod has been turned and not a brick has been laid.

We have introduced a Bill in the House of Lords to clear up any doubts about NHS trusts having the legal power to enter into private finance initiative

commitments. Once that is through, we hope to be able to get ahead with schemes that have been held up under the previous Government. We have inherited a queue of 59 such schemes.

Mr. Letwin: I thank the Secretary of State for his reply. Will he elucidate further, for those of us inexperienced in such matters in the House, whether it is merely an oversight that clause 1(5) of the Bill to which he referred clearly permits the wholesale privatisation of all clinical services or whether it is part of the new Government's radical Thatcherite agenda?

Mr. Dobson: We have made it quite clear that we shall not have clinical services involved in PFI agreements. When the Bill comes to this House from the House of Lords, if the hon. Gentleman wishes to move an amendment to make that clear, I shall consider it carefully.

Mr. Ronnie Campbell: Will my right hon. Friend look into private finance as it affects non-clinical services? My local hospital in Wansbeck is on the verge of a deal, but those working in non-clinical services are worried about their jobs, conditions and wages. Will those services be included in the so-called sell-off?

Mr. Dobson: I must make it clear to my right hon. and hon. Friends and, indeed, to everyone that it is not a sell-off: it is a method of getting private finance to build national health service hospitals which will be run by the national health service. We shall do what we can—not just through the national health service, but through other changes in employment law—to ensure that staff are protected.

Mr. Yeo: I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on his appointment as Secretary of State. Will he now confirm that the prospects for the private finance initiative under the new Government have been largely destroyed by the ill-conceived and probably unlawful attempts of his Treasury colleagues to impose a retrospective tax on private investors in a range of essential industries?

Mr. Dobson: If the number of merchant banks that have been knocking on our doors asking us to go ahead with the private finance initiative that the last Government delayed so much is any indication, the onset of the windfall tax has not put them off: they think that they can make some money out of it and that the national health service can benefit at the same time. One would have thought that the clowns who were in office before us would have sorted things out before now.

Donor Organ Shortage

16. **Mr. Dalyell:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of the current shortage of kidney and other donor organs. [419]

Ms Jowell: Some 2,800 organ transplants were performed in the United Kingdom in 1996. More than half

of them involved the transplantation of kidneys. Some 6,000 people are currently awaiting organs, 5,000 of them for kidney transplants.

The shortfall of organs is due in part to the great success of advances in medicine and public health which mean that fewer people are dying, for instance, in road accidents, and people are recovering from catastrophic illnesses which even a short time ago would have led to their deaths.

Mr. Dalyell: Would Ministers be sympathetic to an amendment of the Human Tissue Act 1961 along opting-out lines?

Ms Jowell: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend's long-standing interest in and concern about the issue. We are very aware of the stress suffered by patients who have to wait a long time for transplants and, like my hon. Friend, we would like the supply of organs to increase. Transplantation is a sensitive issue and approaches to organ donation must command public confidence. We shall therefore be discussing the means of increasing the number of organs available with interested organisations such as the UK Transplant Support Service Authority, the medical profession, transplant co-ordinators and patients' organisations such as the British Kidney Patients Association and the National Kidney Federation. That would be our preferred approach to dealing with the shortfall of organs at this stage.

Mr. Soames: I congratulate the hon. Lady on her new post. Does she agree that the system of advertising for organ donors has been extremely successful and has commanded the confidence of nearly everyone in the country? She is right to refer to the importance of that. Does the hon. Lady also agree that it is very important for the advertising campaigns to continue? Will she take a fresh look to see whether a more novel approach could be instituted to establish further the confidence that is needed throughout the population to ensure a full and proper supply of organ donors for the future?

Ms Jowell: Advertising is one part of the strategy that we would want to assess for increasing the availability of organs for transplant, but I repeat that any steps that we take must command public confidence and there must be a broad public consensus in their favour.

Health and Social Services Authorities

18. Mr. Hinchliffe: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what proposals he has to clarify the specific responsibilities of health and social services authorities. [421]

Mr. Boateng: We are committed to a long-term care charter defining the standards and services that people are entitled to expect from health, housing and social services. In addition, the examination of services for the elderly will consider a range of issues connected with the funding of long-term care. In the meantime, we expect health authorities to continue the good work that they are doing, together with social services, to ensure that they deliver their continuing care responsibilities.

Mr. Hinchliffe: I welcome my hon. Friend to his new brief. In the short time for which he has held that brief, has he had an opportunity to study the issue of boundary disputes between health and social services authorities about, for example, the question of bathing people at home? Does he agree that it is ludicrous for elderly and disabled people to be the subject of disputes about whether they require a "social" bath or a "nursing" bath when all that they need at their age is a bath? Does my hon. Friend agree that the most appropriate response is to establish a single agency competent to deal with all community care needs?

Mr. Boateng: My hon. Friend has considerable experience in this area, which we value enormously, and we certainly recognise his point. It is important for local authorities and the health service to work together to deliver high-quality care to those who need it. We have already begun to talk to the Local Government Association and the National Health Service executive to deal precisely with the matter that my hon. Friend raises. The real concern of the elderly and vulnerable people out there is not so much who pays for it or who does it as whether it is done adequately, on time and with the quality that is necessary for the best possible treatment. Those are the criteria that we shall use. We shall concentrate not on demarcation lines between the NHS and social services but on how to guarantee the best possible treatment for those who need it, and we shall take that forward as a matter of urgency.

Bank of England and Financial Regulation

Madam Speaker: Statement by the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

Mr. Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe): On a point of order, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: Order. The right hon. and learned Gentleman understands that points of order come after statements.

Mr. Clarke: The point of order is relevant to the timing of the statement. I ask for your ruling on the procedure that will cover the delivery of statements to the House in this Parliament. This will be the first statement in the present Parliament. In the past, the convention has been that advance copies of statements are made available to the Opposition about half an hour before their delivery. It has also been the convention that the annunciator shows a clear description of the contents of a statement. [HON. MEMBERS: "No."] Oh, yes.

On this occasion, I am sure that my opposite numbers in the Liberal Democrat party and in the nationalist parties have had the experience that I had. At 16 minutes past 3, an extremely lengthy statement was delivered to the Opposition Whips Office. The scope of the statement extends far beyond the "Bank of England", which is how it is described on the annunciator, and covers reform of the entire Financial Services Act 1986 and the regulatory system for insurance and financial services as well as banking.

May we have your ruling, Madam Speaker, or perhaps a statement from the Government, about the way in which Parliament is to be treated in future on these matters, and whether this is to be typical of the way that the House is to be informed of decisions?

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): Further to that point of order, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: Order. I am capable of answering the point of order.

I can tell the right hon. and learned Gentleman that, since I have been Speaker, descriptions of statements have been extremely vague much of the time. I have not always understood them unless I made inquiries about them. Perhaps matters can be made rather clearer in the next few years.

Secondly, the right hon. and learned Gentleman certainly deserves an apology. I am sure that what he says is absolutely correct, that he has not had the statement in advance as he should have done. I saw it at about 2.15 pm. It is a long statement, and the right hon. and learned Gentleman and members of other parties should have had the statement well in advance to see what it was all about.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: On a point of order, Madam Speaker. It is on the same matter.

Madam Speaker: I shall take no further points of order on that matter, because I have cleared it up.

3.33 pm

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr. Gordon Brown): With permission, Madam Speaker, I should like to make a statement. The Government's central economic objective is high and stable levels of growth and employment. That can happen only if we build on the solid foundation of monetary and fiscal stability. I am determined to set the British economy on a new, long-term course by taking the correct long-term decisions. The previous arrangements for monetary policy were too short-termist, encouraging short but unsustainable booms and bust and higher inflation, which was inevitably followed by recession. That is why we promised in our election manifesto to reform the Bank of England, to ensure that decision making on monetary policy was more effective, open, accountable and free from short-term political manipulation.

On 6 May, I announced the means by which we would achieve that promise: by giving the Bank operational responsibility for setting interest rates. On the first economic day in the new Parliament, I have sought the opportunity to explain my proposals for legislation, which will be introduced to, and fully debated in, the House. The House will understand that the length of the statement reflects the significance of the changes that I propose. May I say to the shadow Chancellor that I made arrangements for him to receive a copy of the statement earlier than he did, and I apologise if that did not happen.

In undertaking the reforms, I have taken account of the recommendations of the Treasury and Civil Service Committee's report on the role of the Bank of England, which stressed the need for clear lines of accountability and answerability for monetary policy to Parliament. In 1993, the Committee stated:

"The present system for determining monetary policy does not, in practice, allow for clear Parliamentary accountability."

The reforms that I propose represent a British solution to meet British needs. Their main elements are as follows. The Bank's monetary policy objective will be to deliver price stability and, without prejudice to that objective, to support the Government's economic policy, including their objectives for growth and employment. The Government will set the inflation target for the Bank. The target will be reviewed annually and announced in the Budget. The Bank will have operational responsibility to achieve the inflation target.

Decisions on what actions need to be taken to achieve the target will be taken by a Monetary Policy Committee, on the basis of a majority vote. The committee will include the Governor and two deputy Governors nominated by the Government, and two senior Bank officials with management responsibility for monetary policy and market operations. However, it will also include four other expert members appointed from outside the Bank by the Government. The committee will be responsible for taking full account of regional and sectoral information in its monetary policy decisions.

The Monetary Policy Committee will meet on a monthly basis. All decisions on interest rates will be announced immediately after the meeting. The proceedings of the meetings, including votes, will be minuted and published within six weeks.

The Monetary Policy Committee's performance will be reviewed by the Court of the Bank. The Court will be substantially reformed, so that it is able to take account

of the full range of industrial and business views in this country, and for the first time it will be fully representative of the whole of the United Kingdom.

The Bank will be expected to report to the Treasury Select Committee and to the House. I shall write to the Chairman suggesting that the Bank's annual report be debated in the House, and that the Bank appear four times a year before the Committee to give evidence and answer questions on each of its inflation reports, so that the Bank's performance will be able to be judged by Parliament.

There will be a review of the Bank's financial arrangements, to ensure that the Bank meets the highest standards of accountability and transparency in the light of its new responsibilities. The Bank's role in debt management will be transferred to the Treasury.

The Government will retain the right to override the Bank's operational independence in extreme economic circumstances for a limited period only, and subject to ratification by the House. I would expect that right to be exercised rarely, if at all. Those requirements mean that, while the Government retain clear responsibility to Parliament for the goals of monetary policy, the Bank will be clearly accountable for the operation of monetary policy and will be required to report to Parliament regularly.

In addition, through the regular publication of the minutes of the Monetary Policy Committee's meetings and the Bank's inflation report, the public will have sufficient information to judge the Bank's performance against the target it is set.

I intend to introduce legislation enacting those changes as soon as possible, for the House to consider. In the meantime, the Governor—for whose co-operation in this matter I am grateful—has agreed on a transitional basis to implement the new procedures for decision making, and I shall nominate the four new members of the Monetary Policy Committee.

The question of prudential supervision, of course, concerns not just the Bank of England but the reform of the Financial Services Act 1986. Financial services lie at the heart of a modern, dynamic economy. The effectiveness and competitiveness of all our industries depend on the availability and efficiency of the increasingly wide array of financial products and services, from pensions and insurance to securities and derivatives. Our standard of living depends on them, particularly in retirement. Financial services are often complex and long-term. Products, markets and advice must therefore be fair, honest and transparent, and command confidence.

It has long been apparent that the regulatory structure introduced by the Financial Services Act is not delivering the standard of supervision and investor protection that the industry and the public have a right to expect.

The current two-tier system splits responsibility between the Securities and Investments Board and the self-regulatory organisations, together with the recognised professional bodies. This division is inefficient and confusing for investors, and lacks accountability and a clear allocation of responsibilities. Reform is long overdue to simplify the delivery of financial services regulation, and this was a key commitment in our business manifesto. At the same time, it is important to preserve the beneficial aspects of the current Act, including practitioner involvement and differential levels of regulation for wholesale and retail business.

I can announce today that work is to start immediately on the legislation needed to simplify and reform the regulatory system at an early opportunity. I am announcing our intentions in advance to give the SIB and the self-regulating bodies the opportunity to work with us on the detailed implementation of our proposals to ensure the smoothest possible transition to the new regime. I am confident that the simpler system we are proposing will reduce compliance costs, and increase public confidence in the regulatory regime.

Simply reforming the Financial Services Act 1986 is not enough in itself. In today's world of integrated global financial markets, the financial services industry transcends geographical and political boundaries and the regulatory response must meet this challenge. The United Kingdom financial services industry needs a regulator which can deliver the most effective supervision in the world.

One cannot ensure the success of British financial services in the 21st century without modernising arrangements for the protection of investors. My reforms are essential to ensure the future confidence of investors small and large, and the future success of the increasingly integrated financial services industry on which so many British jobs now depend.

At the same time, it is clear that the distinctions between different types of financial institution—banks, securities firms and insurance companies—are becoming increasingly blurred. Many of today's financial institutions are regulated by a plethora of different supervisors. This increases the cost and reduces the effectiveness of the supervision.

There is therefore a strong case in principle for bringing the regulation of banking, securities and insurance together under one roof. Firms now organise and manage their businesses on a group-wide basis. Regulators need to look at them in a consistent way. That would bring the regulatory structure closer into line with today's increasingly integrated financial markets. It would deliver more effective and efficient supervision, giving both firms and customers better value for money, and would improve the competitiveness of the sector and create a regulatory regime to genuinely meet the challenges of the 21st century.

I have decided to take the opportunity presented by the Bank of England reform Bill that we will introduce to reform the regulatory system. Responsibility for banking supervision will be transferred, as soon as possible after passage of the Bill, from the Bank of England to a new and strengthened Securities and Investments Board, which will also, as a result of forthcoming legislation, take direct responsibility for the regulatory regime covered by the Financial Services Act.

The Securities and Investments Board will become the single regulator underpinned by statute. The current system of self-regulation will be replaced by a new and fully statutory system, which will put the public interest first, and increase public confidence in the system.

The Governor of the Bank of England will be fully involved in drawing up the detailed proposals. The Bank will remain responsible for the overall stability of the financial system as a whole. The enhanced Securities and Investments Board will be responsible for prudential supervision.

[Mr. Gordon Brown]

As the House will already be aware, Sir Andrew Large, the current chairman of the SIB, has decided to step down. I should like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to him, and thank him for his contribution to financial regulation over the past years.

It is crucial to the success of these reforms that we have a new chairman with the stature and calibre to implement them quickly and smoothly. Because of the importance I attach to drawing on the Bank of England's expertise in these areas, the Governor and I have asked Howard Davies, the deputy Governor of the Bank, to be the first chairman of the enhanced Securities and Investment Board, responsible for integrating the supervision of banking and financial services. I am pleased that he has agreed. He is, of course, already a member of the SIB, and he will take over as chairman when Sir Andrew Large steps down. Two new deputy Governors of the Bank will be appointed in due course.

I have today written to Sir Andrew Large with further details of my proposals. I have placed a copy of this letter, together with my earlier letter to the Governor on monetary policy, in the Library of the House.

I am confident that the new arrangements, taken together, will significantly enhance the credibility of UK monetary policy and improve the workings of the financial markets. The arrangements mean lower long-term interest rates and higher growth and investment. Since my announcement a fortnight ago, long-term interest rates have fallen already, reflecting the positive reaction to the new monetary framework.

The reforms are founded on sound economic principle, and are part of a long-term policy for long-term prosperity. They provide the building blocks for a new economic strategy for monetary and financial stability, aimed at enhancing longer-term growth and prosperity. I am confident that their success will be reflected in a stronger and more robust economy for the long-term. I commend the statement to the House.

Mr. Kenneth Clarke: First, I welcome the Chancellor of the Exchequer to his new post, and I accept the first apology that he has so far had to give me in the current Session of Parliament. In the national interest, I wish him considerable success, so that he does not have to give too many apologies to the British public for the subsequent performance of the economy.

I should like to ask the Chancellor a few straightforward questions on his statement. What does he think he achieved, two weeks ago, by announcing the operational independence of the Bank of England, before he came to the House to make today's statement? What advantage was there in trailing by two weeks a dramatic change in accountability to the House of those who decide United Kingdom monetary policy? Does he agree that, if he had simply waited for two weeks, he would have succeeded—at least a little—in concealing the Government's triumphalism in their huge majority and the danger, which is already visible, of their becoming contemptuous of Parliament and its procedures?

Will the Chancellor also explain to us why, before the general election, he said that he would consider giving the Bank of England operational independence only after it had established a good track record of success in such

matters? He repeated that statement as recently as February 1997. What track record had the Bank achieved in the Government's first four days in office that caused him so rapidly to change his mind? During the general election, why did he conceal from the electorate his obviously settled determination to make that important change within a few days of taking office?

Why has the right hon. Gentleman so swiftly changed a system in which my decisions as Chancellor produced the United Kingdom's best performance on inflation for 50 years—[*Interruption.*] Yes, he is making dramatic changes to a system in which the previous Conservative Government produced the lowest mortgage rates, and in which—as we now know—in the last month before the general election, I hit my inflation target of 2.5 per cent. on the button. Does he now accept, as he must—[HON. MEMBERS: "What a pile of paper."] No, this pile of paper is a copy of the Chancellor's statement. These papers are for my speech—[HON. MEMBERS: "Speech."] No, the papers—the first pages only—are my questions.

On the Bank of England, does the Chancellor accept that the current inflation level, to which we both attach importance, is the result of decisions on monetary policy taken two years ago—when the Bank of England was wrong, I was right, and he was silent about his judgment on the subject? Does he accept that the timing of his decision on the independence of the Bank of England very nearly coincided with production of the Bank's most recent quarterly inflation report—which was wrong, by claiming that, later this year, inflation would fall to 2.5 per cent.? We now know that the inflation had fallen to 2.5 per cent. in April, while the report was being printed.

Does the Chancellor therefore accept that, within four days of taking office, he handed total control of those matters to an institution with a track record showing that it has been wrong, whereas the track record of a Chancellor pursuing the previous Government's economic policies has been shown to be right?

Does the Chancellor agree that, if this leads to the Bank being ultra-prudent, in striving, above all, to get below 2.5 per cent.—as it will in order to hit a flat-rate target—interest rates will be set at a higher rate than would otherwise be necessary? When interest rates are higher than necessary, they depress economic growth, investment, consumer demand and job creation—all of which will grow more slowly than they would otherwise. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that the price for slowing our economic growth will be paid by the men and women who work in British industry and commerce, and by those on the dole queues who will see jobs being created more slowly?

Turning to the Financial Services Act 1986, a separate statement to the House might have been justified, as there is to be a huge change to the regulatory system—probably second only in importance to the monetary policy of the Bank in terms of the financial policy of this country and the City. Why has the Chancellor decided so suddenly to add dramatically to the legislative programme in the Queen's Speech, which we are still debating? The scope of the Bank of England Bill has been extended since the Prime Minister opened the debate five days ago. It has been dramatically enlarged by today's announcement.

The Chancellor talks vaguely about forthcoming legislation on financial services regulation and bringing all previous regulators under the scope of his new

appointment, Mr. Howard Davies, who has been given many such appointments under various Governments—[HON. MEMBERS: "And by you."] And by me, and others—no doubt there will be other appointments under the Labour Government. He brings with him the full experience of about one year at the Bank of England, to which the Chancellor drew particular attention.

Does not the Chancellor accept that making this dramatic announcement with no details causes confusion? The details are contained in a letter to Sir Andrew Large, which, we are told, has been placed in the Library, although no one has had a chance to see it.

The regulation of insurance, of all financial services and of banking has hitherto been done by separate people with separate skills. The Chancellor now proposes that they should be brought together in a way that is still to be defined in a massive piece of legislation. When will that legislation—the new Financial Services Act—be forthcoming? Will it be in this Session of Parliament? If not, what will the Chancellor do about the uncertainty that he is creating by suddenly throwing this country's financial regulatory system into turmoil without giving detailed proposals?

Finally, will the right hon. Gentleman please stop acting like a Chancellor in a desperate hurry? Will he stop acting as if he were making policy on the hoof, as he and his colleagues did in opposition? Will he start placing the preservation of our present excellent economic prospects much higher on his agenda?

Mr. Brown: May I first welcome the shadow Chancellor to his new job, which he already seems to be enjoying? Secondly, although I suppose that he would not want me to say it, I wish him well in the future leadership contest of the Conservative party, and commend his views on Europe to Opposition Members. Thirdly, after the entertainment of yesterday, I thank him for getting back to the real business of the House: the Opposition attacking the Government instead of each other.

The right hon. and learned Gentleman's remarks dealt with all sorts of things, but not the central question whether he supports my reforms of the Bank of England and the regulatory structure. He says, first, that the Government have broken the traditions of consultation in the House whereby Governments have consulted over major monetary decisions. May I remind him that the decision to create the new monetary policy framework and the new inflation target in 1992 was announced by the previous Chancellor to the Conservative party conference, not the House? The right hon. and learned Gentleman's decision to create the "Ken and Eddie show"—for which he showed some nostalgia—was announced in a written answer to the House, without full parliamentary debate. The Labour Government will take no lectures on consultation from the previous Government, who had the chance before the election to publish the Downey report, which would have been one way in which Parliament could have looked at the issues.

On the substantive issue of inflation, the shadow Chancellor seems to have changed his position from the one he held before and during the general election campaign. During the whole campaign, he said of Labour that we would be responsible for higher inflation, that we would return to the days of high inflation, and therefore boom and bust—new Labour, new inflation. Now, for the

leadership election into which he has entered, he has seems to have changed tack completely and accuses us of being, not inflationary, but deflationary.

The right hon. and learned Gentleman should look at the article he wrote on these matters for the *Financial Times*. I have to ask him, why is he criticising us for saying that our inflation target will be met? This Government will keep their promises, and will keep their promises throughout a Parliament.

I shall deal with the issue of regulation, before coming to that of the Bank. We have taken action that the Conservatives should have taken long ago to protect pensioners against the misselling of pensions, to improve the co-ordination of the regime governing financial services products, and to end the situation in which a bank has five separate regulators to which it has to report and in which the costs of compliance—and, indeed, the compliance departments in those organisations—are now almost bigger than the marketing departments that produce the results for those organisations. I shall take no lectures. We have taken swift action on the misselling of pensions, the structure of the financial regime and the operational independence of the Bank of England.

It ill befits the shadow Chancellor to criticise the appointment of Mr. Howard Davies, whom he appointed as the deputy Governor of the Bank.

Let me now deal with the substantive issue that was left unaddressed. The shadow Chancellor's opposition to the reforms we have made at the Bank of England seems to be entirely about method, style and presentation—and, if I may say so, his opposition is recent. Did he not say in 1993 that he had an open mind on this issue, not a closed mind? Did he not say in an interview on "Breakfast With Frost" at the beginning of the year that right-wing parties throughout the world supported the independence of central banks? Does he not understand that his well-known enthusiasm for the European Community means that, if there was to be economic and monetary union, there would have to be an independent central bank?

Let me remind the right hon. and learned Gentleman also of the statements that have been made in the Centre for Policy Studies' Conservative agenda pamphlet, which recommends:

"Give the Bank of England its independence, and a statutory responsibility for meeting certain targets in terms of inflation and economic growth . . . remove the political risk premium on interest rates . . . the Bank will . . . need reform. The current autocratic structure gives the Government too much power . . . interest rate decisions should be taken by a Council".

Those are the very arrangements that we have introduced. The author of that pamphlet was the ex-Chancellor's own former political adviser, Tessa Keswick.

There is widespread support for what we have done. The Confederation of British Industry has welcomed it; the Institute of Directors has welcomed it; and the chambers of commerce have welcomed it—just about everyone except the six contenders for the Conservative leadership, who are vying with each other for extremism, has welcomed it. I say to the shadow Chancellor: I have had the courage of his convictions.

Mr. Robert Sheldon (Ashton-under-Lyne): I offer my good wishes to my right hon. Friend for being a most outstandingly reforming Chancellor of the Exchequer, with few equals in the post-war world.

[*Mr. Robert Sheldon*]

There is no question but that the single regulator for financial institutions is greatly needed. Banks, insurance companies, pension funds and other financial services bodies are becoming increasingly amorphous, and, as a result, the distinctions between them are becoming increasingly blurred. That has been shown in particular by the building societies and the way in which they have transformed themselves. The single regulator is therefore especially welcome, and I look forward to seeing it implemented in legislation.

Mr. Brown: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend, who has had a distinguished role in previous Parliaments as Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee. He has rightly pointed to the overlap, the confusion and the extra costs, and I can assure him that there will be full consultation and a full chance for the House both to look at the details of the proposals before they reach legislative form, and to look at the Bill itself.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce (Gordon): I congratulate the Chancellor on taking up his role and on making his mark in his first two weeks. I also congratulate him on adopting a policy that was a central component of the Liberal Democrat manifesto. May I extend an invitation to him and his colleagues to come round to my office for tea any time, to discover other aspects of policy that he might usefully implement?

The Chancellor has said that his new policy committee will have regional representation, but can he ensure that it will represent all sectors and all parts of the United Kingdom? We want to ensure that it encapsulates not only Gordon's view but perhaps the view from Gordon. We need to ensure that it is fully representative of the whole UK economy.

What measures, apart from the transfer of Howard Davies, will be taken to ensure that there are continuing links between the SIB and the Bank of England, so that the Bank does not lose the useful knowledge that it has acquired on the workings of the monetary system? Formal arrangements need to be made for the continuation of those links.

Given that the Chancellor has made a major step in proposing new statutory financial regulation, what consultation will take place with all interested parties, to ensure that the statutory proposals that emerge are workable and do not damage the functions of the financial markets, which, as he rightly points out, are important to jobs and to consumers of their services?

Mr. Brown: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. This is probably the only one of the central economic policies of the Labour party that he has supported. He has opposed the windfall tax and other measures, but I am grateful for his support in this area.

As far as the Bank of England is concerned, and the reform—

Mr. Kenneth Clarke: But it was not in your manifesto.

Mr. Brown: We said in our manifesto that we would reform the Bank of England to create a monetary policy decision-making system that was more effective, open and

accountable and free from short-term party political manipulation, and that we would reform the regulatory system. We have reformed the Bank of England, we have made it more effective, open and accountable, we have freed monetary policy decision making from political influence and manipulation, and at the same time we are reforming the regulatory structure.

On the subject of the Court of the Bank of England, I agree with the hon. Gentleman. When the Bank of England was nationalised in the 1940s, no real change was made in the organisation of the Court. It is time to ensure that it represents business and sectoral interests throughout the United Kingdom, and all sections of the United Kingdom. When I studied the composition of the Court of the Bank of England, I found that what Courts had in common was that they always included the chairman of a football club in the English league. I want industry to be properly represented, and I want every region, including Scotland and Wales, to be represented on the Court of the Bank of England.

On the hon. Gentleman's other points about the SIB, I can assure him that there will be full consultation, and that the existing good relationship between the SIB and the Bank of England will be maintained, not least by the appointment of the existing deputy Governor as the chairman of the SIB.

Mr. Giles Radice (North Durham): Is my right hon. Friend aware that, following the collapse of the Bank of Credit and Commerce International and Baring's, the Treasury Select Committee, with a Conservative majority, said that there was a strong case for separating the supervisory functions from the Bank? Is it not the case that the Government's welcome proposal for operational independence for the Bank, again as first suggested by the Treasury Select Committee, makes the case for separating the supervisory functions stronger?

Mr. Brown: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, because he reminds me, not only that the Treasury Select Committee recommended those things, but that he was a prominent member of the Select Committee that made the recommendations.

We shall listen to the Select Committees as we discuss the issues of the Bank of England and of regulation, but my hon. Friend asked the right question—why did the previous Government not act when all the evidence was available?

Sir Peter Tapsell (Louth and Horncastle): Does the Chancellor recall that, after every one of the five Labour Governments whom the country has had to endure, unemployment has always been higher when they left office than when they took office? Against that unhappy historical record, will he at least ensure that, under his new arrangements, the Bank of England is given published goals for economic growth and unemployment, as well as for inflation?

Mr. Brown: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. The real record is that the former Conservative Government left more Conservative Members unemployed than at any time in any century.

I agree that high levels of growth and employment are the stated aims and objectives of the Government. Our objective will be to raise the trend rate of growth in the

economy. Over the past 18 years—partly because of the recessions, the booms and busts, and the stop-go policies that characterised the performance of the Conservative Government—the average non-oil growth rate was only 1.7 per cent.: 30 per cent. below our performance in the 30 years following the war. We must do something about that. That is why monetary and fiscal stability are our platform on which to build. We shall introduce measures to encourage investment and growth in the economy.

Mr. Stuart Bell (Middlesbrough): Will the Chancellor accept that the statement by the shadow Chancellor just now was entirely false? He talked about insecurity in the City of London arising from the changes being made to the financial services regime, but surely the rapidity of my right hon. Friend's decision will bring certainty to the City, because it has accepted independent statutory regulation.

The Chancellor did not specifically mention Lloyd's of London, although he did mention insurance. Will Lloyd's be covered by the new body, or will the prudential supervision of insurance stay with the Department of Trade and Industry?

Mr. Brown: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend's work over a long period in opposition building up good relations between the Government and the City. Lloyd's has asked to be recognised by the SIB. That issue will be pursued. Secondly, I believe that there will be a broad welcome throughout the financial community, not just for ending uncertainty in a situation in which action had to be taken, but for the specific details of the proposals and for the appointment that I have made today.

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde): Central to the Chancellor's new role for the Bank of England in operationally setting interest rates is the question of the inflation target. Will he undertake to publish the criteria that he will consider when setting the inflation target? Will he also publish details of the lead indicators that he will use in that exercise? Finally, will he agree, in the new spirit of audit which abounds in the Treasury, to have his work in this area audited by independent economists?

Mr. Brown: I am glad to see the right hon. Gentleman return to the House. As I understand it, apart from the shadow Chancellor, he is the only member of the former Treasury team to be re-elected—which may say something about the previous Government's record in financial matters.

I can assure the right hon. Gentleman not just that we will give full information about the inflation target in our Budget, as I promised, but that we will publish six months before normal Budgets a White Paper or a Green Paper so that there can be proper debate on the Government's position on inflation and on the growth rate and employment potential of the economy.

All these issues should be subject to more open and informed national debate, involving people from all sections of industry as well as this House. I pledge that there will be far more open government under this Government than there was under the last.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): Over the past 18 years, a lot of people became anxious to see a new

Labour Government doing something to clean up the City of London, so most people will welcome what the Chancellor had to say today on that score—not least because of the excesses of Johnson Matthey under the Conservative Government, because of Nicky Leeson, and because, when the exchange rate mechanism collapsed, the former Government lost 10 times more money in one afternoon than Leeson managed to lose in six months. There was a crying need to do something about all that.

I cannot understand, however, in a world economy that offers very few financial levers to any incoming Government, why, after 18 years out of power, the first thing a Labour Government do—without a manifesto commitment in precise terms—is hand over one of the most important financial levers to the enemy. No one will convince me that Eddie George and the rest of them in the belly of the banking establishment are on the side of the workers. I know that my right hon. Friend will go to some lengths to explain it away—but he ain't going to convince me.

Mr. Brown: I should thank my hon. Friend for all his detailed research into these matters, financial and City, and ask him to read the detail of our manifesto commitment, which explains what we have done. It is important for a Government to set down a long-term framework. The idea that interest rate decisions should be the basis of short-term political party manipulation deprives people of the long-term certainty and confidence they need as businesses, as workers and as families to plan their future.

I have set down a long-term framework. The Government set out the objectives of economic policy—and, indeed, the inflation target—but no one can accuse the Government of trying to manipulate the setting of interest rates for political party ends. I was asked by the shadow Chancellor why I had made the decision now. I saw during the election campaign and before that a suspicion could arise that decisions were being made for party political ends. I believed that it was right to take action immediately to change the basis of the system.

On my hon. Friend's comments on regulation, he will applaud what the Economic Secretary to the Treasury has already done. She has called together all the pension institutions. She has said that it is a scandal that, of the 600,000 people who were misold personal pensions, only 7,000 people have been compensated, and she has rightly demanded that the companies come back with proposals for action immediately. All of us who have been Members of Parliament for years, and many of us who have been candidates and are now Members of Parliament, know at first hand the problems of people who have been misold pensions. It was urgent that she took that action, and I hope that the whole House will applaud her for it.

Mr. Alex Salmond (Banff and Buchan): Does the Chancellor accept that, although of course there are advantages in having an operationally independent central bank, there are also dangers if the monetary policy objectives are set too tightly? Therefore, when he talks about the monetary policy objective being price stability, does he mean literally zero inflation or the 2.5 per cent. target inherited from the previous Chancellor? Why is that given primacy over the Government's targets for unemployment and for output? Is there not a danger of overshoot?

[Mr. Alex Salmond]

The Bundesbank has a statutory obligation to reflect the Länder—the regional interests in Germany. Is the Chancellor envisaging a statutory obligation on the Bank of England to reflect the Scottish-Welsh regions of interest? Will that obligation be just on the Court of the Bank, or will it be on the Monetary Policy Committee, which will actually take the decisions?

Mr. Brown: I hope that the hon. Gentleman will examine in more detail my statement and the proposals that I made a few days ago. I said that the Court of the Bank of England will reflect all the regional and national interests in the United Kingdom, and that is what we intend should happen.

On the hon. Gentleman's point about inflation, it will be the Government who set the inflation target, and I have already said that we will follow the inflation target that has been set by the previous Government. I will announce the inflation target Budget by Budget, and that matter will be debated in the House, but the hon. Gentleman should consider modern economics in more detail.

The causes of inflation and the causes—[*Interruption.*] The hon. Gentleman prides himself on economics, but I have always found that his figures on Scotland never add up. The causes of inflation, low growth and unemployment are exactly the same—a lack of capacity in the industrial economy. The important thing is that the Government must set the framework for monetary and fiscal stability and encourage dynamism in industry, which we will do by measures to encourage education, training and investment.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): May I tempt my right hon. Friend the Chancellor to go just a little further than he did with the hon. Member for Gordon (Mr. Bruce), and say that he will perhaps give pleasure to his constituents, and certainly to those of my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary and to mine, by appointing a member of the Edinburgh financial community in the first tranche? Secondly, given the distinguished service of Sir Gavin Laird, is there a clear undertaking that someone from the industrial trade unions will be appointed?

Mr. Brown: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his suggestions. I have always said that the Court of the Bank of England should represent all sides of industry, and I hope that he will agree with me on that. On his proposal for a representative of the Edinburgh financial community, I am not sure how that will go down in Gordon, Glasgow or other parts of Scotland. What I can say is that the regions and the nations of the United Kingdom should all be represented on the Court.

Mr. Quentin Davies (Grantham and Stamford): May I congratulate the Chancellor sincerely on his new position, and wish him well? Many of us on these Benches intend to act in good faith in opposition, to oppose where we genuinely think it in the national interest that we should oppose, and to support where we genuinely think it in the national interest that we should support.

In the same spirit, will the Chancellor give credit where credit is so obviously due? Will he recognise that the previous Government did achieve, before the end of the

Parliament, 2.5 per cent. inflation, contrary to his own and the Bank of England's expectations, that the latest public sector borrowing requirement figures show a considerable improvement over the previous Government's expectations, and that he therefore inherits a sound financial base?

Mr. Brown: As the hon. Gentleman knows, interest rates are set to deal with inflation 18 months ahead. When I arrived at the Treasury and looked at the forecast, it became clear to me that inflation would rise substantially unless action was taken. If the shadow Chancellor wants to know why I announced the decisions immediately after I came into the Treasury, it was because, as a result of the mismanagement of previous months, I had to announce an interest rate rise to cope with a looming problem of inflation a year ahead. I felt it right to set down the long-term course of action simultaneously, and that is what I did.

The hon. Gentleman wants us to applaud the past Government's record on the economy. No Government could have kept us in recession for ever. We are bequeathed a situation in which manufacturing investment fell by 8 per cent. last year, and manufacturing output rose by only 0.5 per cent. At the same time, we have a public sector borrowing requirement that was £23 billion last year, which the hon. Gentleman would not identify with sound finance, and a considerable figure this year.

The hon. Gentleman cannot say that his Government, who were also responsible for imposing 22 tax rises on the British people, left us with sound public finances or with inflation properly under control for the long term. That is why we have taken action on interest rates. To avoid that situation in the future, we have put in place a long-term framework, which I believe will commend itself right across the country.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: Will my right hon. Friend reflect on the fact that, over a period of four consecutive Conservative Governments, we had almost the highest interest rates paid by any country in the industrialised world? Is it not true that that happened because interest rates were being manipulated, and markets had no confidence in the Government?

Mr. Brown: We inherited a situation in which long-term interest rates are less than 6 per cent. in Germany and France, less than 7 per cent. in America, but 7.6 per cent. in Britain. That can hardly be said to be a brilliant performance on the part of the Government. As a result of our announcements on monetary policy, long-term interest rates started to fall. The Opposition's position on the matter is not clear, but they should look at the figures and make a reasoned judgment when they receive in the House of Commons the Bill to give operational independence to the Bank of England.

Before the end of today's debate, which will take place after the statement, the shadow Chancellor should answer this question: would he repeal a Bank of England reform Act that gave operational independence to the Bank of England? If he cannot say he would, all his complaints are simply synthetic.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): I congratulate the Chancellor of the Exchequer on the emphasis he

placed on the importance of long-termism. That is long overdue. Does he accept that manufacturing industry is the only genuine source of non-inflationary sustainable growth? Does he believe that what he announced today will genuinely help manufacturing industry, which is a critical and vital part of the UK economy?

Mr. Brown: I applaud the hon. Gentleman's campaign over a long period of years on behalf of manufacturing industry. I ask him to consider the fact that the percentage of total national investment in manufacturing stands at 1.7 per cent. at present—the worst figure since figures were first recorded. Whereas, in the 1970s and 1980s, investment rose significantly out of recession, in the 1990s manufacturing investment in particular has not risen. In real terms, it is still lower than it was in 1979, when the Conservative Government came to power.

It is therefore incumbent on us to see what more we can do to assist manufacturing industry, by helping it to invest for the long term and giving it the skills and education that are necessary for it to produce the value added products that are so important. I believe that the House will find this Government to be the true friend of manufacturing industry.

Dr. Lynne Jones (Birmingham, Selly Oak): I welcome my right hon. Friend's comments this afternoon about the composition of the Court of the Bank of England. What criteria will he take into account when appointing the deputy Governors of the Bank of England and the four members of the Monetary Policy Committee? When will he name those appointees, and how long will they serve? At the risk of sounding churlish, how might they be dismissed, in line with their accountability to the Treasury Select Committee?

Mr. Brown: My hon. Friend asks what the deputy Governors will do. One deputy Governor will be responsible for monetary stability and the other for financial stability. That reflects the full range of responsibilities of the Bank of England for the stability of the financial system as a whole, and for operational decision making about interest rates.

As for the range of expertise that is necessary to form the Monetary Policy Committee, I shall look—in consultation with others—for a range of monetary expertise, but the critical condition for appointment must be expertise in this area. The term of appointment will be three years. It is important to recognise that these decisions broaden the base for monetary policy decision making in an unprecedented manner, and put us in line with many other countries that have far more successful arrangements than we have had in the past.

I believe that, once it is up and running, the system will be successful. It will take effect, de facto, immediately. I hope that we shall be able to announce appointments to the Monetary Policy Committee within the next few weeks.

Mr. Damian Green (Ashford): Will the Chancellor acknowledge that Opposition Members are genuinely afraid that the Government are prepared to ride roughshod over the interests of Parliament? In light of that, will he consider giving the House some say in appointing the members of the Monetary Policy Committee and the two

deputy Governors? For instance, will he consider allowing the Treasury Select Committee to interview the candidates before they are appointed, and, if necessary, approve the appointments? Will he further acknowledge that, if he does not make such a gesture, the so-called operational independence of the Monetary Policy Committee will be seen as something of a sham?

Mr. Brown: The hon. Gentleman, whom I welcome to the House, talks about systems of consultation and proper accountability. He clearly was not present during the last Parliament. He was not here when the arms to Iraq and the Pergau dam incidents became known, or when suspicions surrounding the Downey report were raised by hon. Members on all sides.

First, through the Bank of England Bill and the discussions surrounding it; and secondly, through the Treasury Select Committee's ability to call the Governor of the Bank of England to account and our full debate on the Bank of England report in the House of Commons, we are putting in place far more accountability and reporting and a system of greater information flow than existed in any previous Parliament.

As to regulations and responsibilities in that regard, I have already said—if Conservative Members had followed my comments about the future of the Securities and Investments Board—that there will be full consultation before the legislation is finally put in Second Reading form to the House. The draft Bill will form the basis of consultation once it is drawn up. I assure all hon. Members that we intend to discharge our responsibilities to provide full information to the House.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): While recognising that no lectures are required from the Conservatives about accountability or any other matter—especially in light of the high unemployment during the past 18 years—is my right hon. Friend aware that there is bound to be concern within the wider Labour movement about the amount of economic power that is being given to the Bank of England in the operation of monetary policy? Would it be unfair to say that, by and large, bankers have not been particularly sympathetic to what the Labour movement and the Labour party have stood for: full employment, policies that improve the lot of working people, and a decent welfare state?

Mr. Brown: I must tell my hon. Friend that the previous system left more than 1.5 million people unemployed by the time that the Conservative Government left office. Of those 1.5 million, 600,000 young people did not have a chance under the Conservative Government of receiving the jobs and opportunities that they will receive under a Labour Government.

My hon. Friend talks about bankers. The Monetary Policy Committee that I have described will include four economic experts appointed by the Government, who will not be traditional bankers as he understands that term. As for economic power, it will be the Government who set the objectives of economic policy. The Government will set the inflation target, and we shall appoint the four members of the Monetary Policy Committee and the main members of the Court of the Bank of England.

I assure my hon. Friend that I believe that we are setting a long-term framework for economic policy that has the right balance between the decisions that must be made by

[Mr. Brown]

politicians and the decisions that must be left for operational responsibility, to be held by the Bank of England.

Mr. Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green): I congratulate the Chancellor of the Exchequer on assuming his new position. I should be grateful if in future he would place his statement in the Vote Office so that Back-Bench Members might have it when he rises to speak in the Chamber. That is a point for the future.

Secondly, the Chancellor has announced a major change in the regulatory structure of the City, and has made comparisons with other countries. The right hon. Gentleman will be aware that the City has been a major success for the United Kingdom in producing export finance, and in producing jobs throughout the country. Will he therefore be extremely careful, in making the changes that he has announced, to ensure that he is not taking a sledgehammer to crack a nut, and to ensure also that in reality he does not crush the very vibrancy of wealth creation that takes place in the City merely in chasing to the last degree what might be considered at times the excessive pursuit of wealth in the City?

Mr. Brown: I think that the hon. Gentleman will find that there is a general welcome for my proposals for cleaning up the regulatory system and making it more co-ordinated. I am happy to pay tribute to the work that 2.5 million men and women undertake in the financial services industry. I believe that our proposals, which are about the long term in increasingly integrated financial markets, will do more to help to provide jobs than the hon. Gentleman is suggesting.

The hon. Gentleman proposes increased flows of information to Back-Bench Members. I am happy to consider, as my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House will be, any such proposals. Surely it is rather strange, however, that the hon. Gentleman never made such proposals when the Conservative party was in government.

Mr. Dennis Canavan (Falkirk, West): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his appointment, but may I put it to him that some of us would prefer to put trust in him as Chancellor of the Exchequer, being accountable to Parliament, instead of in a committee of bankers and so-called financial experts, especially when it comes to the setting of interest rates, which can have an effect on

people's savings, their housing costs, business viability, unemployment, and many other things that have an effect on the lives of those we represent?

Mr. Brown: I thought that my hon. Friend was going to make the case for Falkirk or Cowdenbeath being represented on the Court of the Bank of England. It is precisely because of our anxieties to protect the position of pensioners and of those who are saving for their pensions that we have introduced reforms in the structure of regulatory organisations. It is precisely for that reason that my hon. Friend the Economic Secretary has acted immediately to try to deal with the misselling of pensions.

As for the benefits that are available to people in and out of work, I know that what is needed in the economy is a platform of stability, and that is why we have put long-term arrangements in place. It is now the time to get away from the short-termism, the boom and bust and the stop-go years that prevailed under the previous Government. We have set in place a long-term framework, which means that the Government set the economic objectives. Operational responsibility for interest rates is with the Bank of England.

Mr. Tim Yeo (South Suffolk): I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on his appointment as Chancellor of the Exchequer. Will he confirm, given his party's commitment to ensuring that decision making on monetary policy becomes more open and more accountable, that he and other Treasury Ministers will continue to answer questions on the Floor of the House about the level of interest rates?

Mr. Brown: We are answering questions on 12 June.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney, North and Stoke Newington): Is my right hon. Friend aware that his proposals to clean up the financial services industry will be widely welcomed, not least by many of those who work within it? In his far-reaching examination of financial service regulations, has my right hon. Friend considered the Government's supervision of the London stock exchange?

Mr. Brown: I thank my hon. Friend for the work that she does on the Treasury Select Committee. Such a review is part of the work that we are undertaking. It is precisely because we recognise the importance that must be directed to the misselling of pensions and jobs in the financial services industry that we have taken the actions we have on coming into government.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Speaker: Order. I must now bring this exchange to a close.

Orders of the Day

Debate on the Address

[FIFTH DAY]

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on Question [14 May].

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, as follows:—

Most Gracious Sovereign,

We, Your Majesty's most dutiful and loyal subjects, the Commons of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, in Parliament assembled, beg leave to offer our humble thanks to Your Majesty for the Gracious Speech which Your Majesty has addressed to both Houses of Parliament.—
[*Mr. Kaufman.*]

Question again proposed.

The Economy and European Affairs

Madam Speaker: I have selected the amendment standing in the name of the Leader of the Opposition. I shall call the amendment standing in the name of the right hon. Member for Yeovil (Mr. Ashdown) for Division purposes, if that is required, at the end of the debate.

I must tell the House that many hon. Members will be disappointed today. I know that many wish to speak in the debate, so I ask for voluntary restraint in the length of speeches from those I call, so that I can call as many hon. Members as possible.

4.29 pm

Mr. Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe): I beg to move, as an amendment to the Address, at the end of the Question, to add:

"but humbly regret that there is no mention in the Gracious Speech of the healthy economic climate in the country with rising living standards, low inflation, public finances moving towards balance and further falls in unemployment; deplore the Government's granting of operational independence to the Bank of England without any Parliamentary debate or statement; and urge the Government not to sign the Social Chapter, introduce a minimum wage, or to damage the United Kingdom's flexible labour market in any way by adopting European labour and social legislation."

I repeat my congratulations to the right hon. Member for Dunfermline, East (Mr. Brown) on his appointment and his Government's success. I also congratulate him on the fact that he has not lost his skill, which he polished so well during the election, in not answering questions, but we should consider the precipitate action that he has taken. He rather stands out in this new Government. He spends most of his time at the moment, in a slightly triumphalist way, simply enjoying the Government's victory, and putting on something of a performance of victory gestures.

The Deputy Prime Minister and Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. John Prescott): Why not?

Mr. Clarke: I fear that when the Government get on to the serious business, we shall have more to worry about than being told that it is all Tony, Robin and Gordon at

Cabinet meetings, that the Elgin marbles are safe with the nation and that the Chancellor will wear a grey suit at the Mansion House, and so on.

Mr. Giles Radice (North Durham): Will the right hon. and learned Gentleman give way?

Mr. Clarke: No; I must move on to the serious discussion.

The Chancellor is made of sterner stuff. He has, as I just said, charged in and taken extremely serious decisions. I think that he will agree that, since moving from opposition to government, all the presentational stuff that so dominated Labour's activities before now has had to take its proper place. The secret of good government is to get the big decisions right, because one has to live with those decisions afterwards. The presentation should follow the correct decision, not come before it or instead of it, as so many of the right hon. Gentleman's colleagues seem to believe.

The Chancellor has a serious job to do, with extremely big decisions to take on the economy and Europe, the subject matter of our debate today. He has started taking them, in rapid succession, while his colleagues are still whooping it up in their offices, celebrating their arrival. The problem is that those are big decisions, the effect of which we shall all appreciate in two years' time and more, although he has taken most of them in two short weeks. I admire his confidence to plunge into those big decisions, but I must warn him that it will be no good repeating his election slogans when he comes to defend the consequences in two years' time.

I have been in many Departments and in most, decisions—some one gets right and some one gets wrong—are usually a matter of opinion some years afterwards, and a defence can be mounted of most of the things that one has done. The trouble with being Chancellor is that figures come out remorselessly. Out come results. The impact of the economy on the men and women of this country is felt by every household in the land. Decisions will be judged by whether, in two years' time and more, unemployment is falling at anything like its present rate; whether inflation has indeed been kept down to its present level; whether our growth record is being improved, as the right hon. Gentleman constantly implied it would when he fought the election; whether public finances remain healthy; and whether he sticks to his tax pledges. That is the problem that he faces.

The secret is to get the big decisions right. My opinion is based on a short fortnight, but I shall be generous. I shall keep an open mind on the subject and congratulate the right hon. Gentleman if he has got it right, but he has made a dreadful start, and in his enthusiasm he is taking decisions that he will regret and which the public will bitterly regret as the mistakes unfold.

The right hon. Gentleman has made at least four big mistakes already. One of them we have just discussed. I shall not repeat the points that I made, not one of which was answered. There was no explanation as to why all of this was not said a fortnight ago; no explanation as to why he did not agree with the hon. Member for Gordon (Mr. Bruce), the spokesman for the Liberal Democrats, when he said that he believed in an independent central bank, when all three of us appeared together on the platform and on television programmes. That policy was

[Mr. Clarke]

not in the Labour party's manifesto. The right hon. Gentleman detached himself from the policy and within four days of taking office he actually carried it out.

However, the election is behind us, so let us move to what will happen. As I said, the starting point for the Chancellor's policy was an inflation figure for April bang on target—2.5 per cent. That inflation target has been inherited by the Government and they must deliver it. The main influences on that inflation rate were the decisions that I took as Chancellor, accountable to the House, 18 months to two years ago.

I do not criticise the Bank, Eddie George or Howard Davies, but it is a matter of history that the Chancellor's judgment about how far to go to bring inflation down was correct and that of the Bank and many other financial advisers was wrong. Without going into what happened before, I can remember at least one key decision where I could really only find two people remotely inside the system who agreed with what I was doing—my right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young), who will reply to the debate, and the former Minister for Trade, then the hon. Member for Chichester, Mr. Nelson, who has retired from the House.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce (Gordon): The right hon. and learned Gentleman is bound to defend his record, but does not he acknowledge that Britain paid a premium on long-term interest rates during that time for his right to interfere politically, a factor that put us at the top of the European league for the most expensive interest rates?

Mr. Clarke: The premium that we pay, which was referred to by the Chancellor, is what people must pay to protect themselves against the higher risk resulting from a good 30 or 40 years of being a more inflationary country than other western European countries or the United States, and our history of devaluation of our currency. To reduce that, we require a track record.

The French have proved that by bringing their long-term rates down by a 10-year record of low inflation. The Conservative Government achieved a four-year record in which inflation did not rise above 4 per cent. for 54 months. That was the best for 50 years. It takes time to win that. Short-term movements, as the hon. Gentleman knows only too well, are no judgment of a policy at all. Market reactions two days after a statement should not be taken as proving anything. What was needed was a consistent pursuit of the previous Government's successful policy.

The Chancellor has handed over responsibility to the Bank, which was wrong, before it had the track record, and at a time when it was publishing a quarterly report which, as I have said, was wrong. The Chancellor did not respond to that. It is inescapable that the report which was produced was making a wrong statement.

Let me move on from that, because we shall all judge how the new system works.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr. Gordon Brown): If the right hon. and learned Gentleman thinks that the decision was wrong, will he give an undertaking that any future Conservative Government would repeal the legislation to give the Bank operational independence?

Mr. Clarke: To plan for government in five years' time will be a pleasure. The right hon. Gentleman would not

reveal his intentions four days before he made his announcement, yet he expects me to say what we shall do five years ahead when we win back power, as we most surely will if he goes on making the mistakes that he is making.

Before moving on from monetary policy and inflation, I want to deal with the one decision that the Chancellor made himself—part of the mistake that he has made on monetary policy. He raised interest rates by a quarter of 1 per cent. He attended one meeting, of which the minutes were produced, of the traditional Gordon and Eddie show—as it was on that occasion. To try to make some machismo point with the City, to underline the confidence that he wished to establish, he raised interest rates by a quarter of 1 per cent.

The right hon. Gentleman had the nerve to say that he had to do that because of my record of political manipulation. He knows from the figures that there was no political manipulation. He may say that he saw forecasts, but while I was Chancellor, the Bank's forecasts were always wrong, as were most of the other inflation forecasts. The right hon. Gentleman did that as a gesture. In itself, a rise of one quarter of 1 per cent. creates no difficulty, but it makes a difference. It is well within the margin of error. The problem is the background. The Chancellor acted on the basis that inflationary pressures were building up. I believe that it was a mistake that, if interest rates had to move at all, he should increase them so quickly. The signal will have a lasting effect.

Let me explain why an interest rate rise of one quarter of 1 per cent. was a mistake and why I would not have taken that decision had I been Chancellor at that monetary meeting. Sterling remains extremely strong—some 20 per cent. higher against the Deutschmark than it was 12 months ago—and the inflationary effects are still working their way into the economy. Factory gate prices remain dramatically low by historical standards and the growth of industrial production remains extremely subdued. Earnings increases remain low. All the pessimists in the Bank and in the outside world feared, as I was repeatedly told, that earnings would take off this spring, but all the figures show that they have not.

What will be the effect of the Chancellor's precipitate decision to raise interest rates immediately by one quarter of 1 per cent. and to give the Bank operational independence before it had gained the track record to which he had referred? Moving quickly triggers expectation of further interest rate rises and the markets will react accordingly. Moving too quickly when one has to raise interest rates will almost certainly mean that the eventual peak of interest rate levels will be higher than might otherwise have been the case. As I have said, there are figures by which one can judge what happens during a Chancellor's period of office of 18 months or two years and how decisions are taken. By moving too quickly, the Chancellor has probably ensured that the base rate will eventually rise too high and move above 6.75 per cent.—the highest figure during my four years in office.

Mr. Radice: I note the right hon. and learned Gentleman's confidence in his own judgment on interest rates. Has he noted that two of his predecessors, Nigel Lawson and Norman Lamont, now argue for operational independence of the Bank of England?

Mr. Clarke: That was always put to me before. I arrived at the Treasury with an open mind and I left it

able to say that when we differed at key moments—and we did not always differ; we usually agreed—the Bank turned out to be wrong and my judgments turned out to be right. That has kept my mind open, at the very least. In five years' time, I might be asked to say what I would do, but now I can say only that I cannot understand why the Chancellor threw away his words about a track record and went ahead immediately.

Monetary policy and where one sets interest rates are matters of interest not just to City folk and the Treasury Committee. We all know that the Governor of a central bank with no track record will be ultra-prudent. There is a better track record in the Bundesbank and a long history in the Federal Reserve, but the danger of suddenly giving control to the Bank of England is that it will be ultra-prudent. The one thing that the Bank will have to prove to the Treasury Committee is that it can get inflation right. It will sure as hell make sure that it hits 2.5 per cent. It will set higher interest rates and it will get inflation down to that crucially important target.

Of course, interest rates have to be set high enough to achieve the inflation target, but they should also be kept as low as possible to achieve maximum growth, investment and employment. What will it mean for the man or woman in the street if my fears are right and the suddenly established independent operational committee in the Bank of England raises interest rates higher than would otherwise be necessary to hit the inflation target? For the man in the street, it will mean not only higher mortgage rates, but lost investments, lost jobs and lost consumer demand.

Mr. Jonathan Sayeed (Mid-Bedfordshire): It is estimated that every 1 per cent. rise in interest rates costs about 250,000 export jobs. If the Bank continued raising interest rates after the Chancellor's increase of one quarter of 1 per cent., has my right hon. and learned Friend made any estimate of how many export jobs would be lost?

Mr. Clarke: I cannot give an instant estimate, but the figures used by my hon. Friend have a great deal of common usage and credibility among financial commentators. It is inevitable that if interest rates are set higher than necessary to meet whatever inflation target one has, there will be a sacrifice and that must include jobs. If in the past two or three years we had had the system that the Chancellor is now recommending, interest rates would have been higher than 6.75 per cent. by at least 0.5 per cent., but as the momentum of policy was going in that direction, they would probably have gone higher still.

The Chancellor has made a serious mistake because he does not trust his own judgment. He believes that he will give way to political pressures from his colleagues, so it is essential for the Bank to have operational independence. I have some sympathy with him there. If I was driven to choose between the judgment of Eddie George and that of the Chancellor, I might even accept the judgment of Eddie George, but I should prefer above all the judgment of a Conservative Chancellor who truly understood market economics and got it right. That was the Chancellor's first big mistake.

Mr. Robert Sheldon (Ashton-under-Lyne): The right hon. and learned Gentleman is introducing a new doctrine that if one raises interest rates a little too early,

the subsequent rates will always be too high. Most commentators say the opposite: if one fails to do it in time, the interest rates will be too high afterwards.

Mr. Clarke: Interest rates should rise according to the data. They vary from month to month in reaction to the latest information to hit the markets. When that information shows inflationary pressures building up, one has to react to the markets to get them under control. On this occasion, the Chancellor increased interest rates by a quarter of 1 per cent. when, in my opinion, nothing whatever in the data showed any necessity to do so. When inflationary pressures occur, as may well happen if the present rate of growth continues, interest rates will have to move from a higher base and will be carried by momentum too high. There is plenty of experience of that.

In any case, we shall see, but we shall not allow the Chancellor to say that that is no longer his responsibility. He will not be able to say, "I did not trust my own judgment and I handed it over to somebody else, so if things have gone wrong, don't blame me." We shall blame him all the time if interest rates become too high and we lose growth in the economy.

After my first criticism, let me now be magnanimous and offer the Chancellor a piece of advice. In my opinion, he should not make the second mistake that he is loudly trumpeting at the moment. He should not have a June Budget. My advice to the Chancellor is that he should not have a Budget before the ordinary time for one.

The British economy does not need an emergency Budget. For some reason, the Chancellor's people are leaking like mad about what might be in the Budget. I suspect that it is the result of his taking too many political appointees into his office, but I shall not make allegations unless and until they can be substantiated, or at least I shall not press them. If those leaks are accurate, we need the Chancellor's planned June Budget like we need a hole in the head.

As we all know, the Budget will begin with the fabled windfall tax. I shall debate that at length when we are finally told the truth about its contents and when we can see precisely where it falls. That debate is familiar to us all. At the election, the Labour party sold the idea to the general public as a tax that would affect only fat cats and raise billions of pounds that could be used to abolish unemployment among young people.

We challenge every bit of that shabby thesis. I pity the Government for having to put it into practice and then, in two or three years' time, having to argue that it worked. The tax will affect shareholders, employees and customers of every company affected. It will increase the total tax burden on the economy. It will cost us more economic growth, which is what happens when one raises the tax burden. Worst of all, the training and make-work schemes devised by Labour will not deliver the expectations on youth unemployment which it has so cruelly raised.

I am not an alien in this area. I have devised many employment-creating schemes over the years, and I do not oppose them all automatically. Together with my noble Friend Lord Young, I put together a package called "action for jobs" in the mid-1980s, when more than 3 million people were unemployed in this country. I introduced job clubs, which have proved the best of the methods that we put together to provide intensive support for job searching by the long-term unemployed.

[Mr. Clarke]

In my second Budget, I improved family credit, extending the child care allowance. I experimented with national insurance holidays—NICs holidays—for employers who took on the long-term unemployed. But I do not believe—and I have the experience to challenge it—that a one-off levy of £3 billion can be used to abolish unemployment among a quarter of a million people, genuinely and permanently.

I doubt the validity of the estimates that the Chancellor has given, because I do not think that those estimates—made in opposition—take sufficient account of the displacement of other workers by subsidised workers, or the loss of jobs when a short-term subsidy ends and the employer lays someone off in order to take on someone else with a subsidy. That quarter of a million will melt away. I do not believe that the Chancellor's plan will achieve a permanent reduction in unemployment, thereby saving public money that can be spent elsewhere. I said that I would not debate the windfall tax for too long, but we shall see in due course whether the Chancellor can make his estimate stand up any better than any of the estimates that he used to give on unemployment when his party was in opposition.

Mr. Gordon Brown: The shadow Chancellor says that our promises to the unemployed are hollow. What is more hollow than the promise that he made in one of his previous Budgets that he would create 130,000 jobs for the long-term unemployed by means of a new measure, given that he then created only 5,000? What is worse than making promises, as he did, and failing to keep them? Should he not apologise to the long-term unemployed?

Mr. Clarke: The Chancellor's criticism of the NICs holiday to which he has referred was that I delayed it, and did not introduce it quickly enough. The NICs holiday was part of a package—the family credit package—which has been reduced since that time. Long-term unemployment, together with the generality of unemployment, has fallen. We are achieving that in this country; but, in the real world, these measures can do no more than back up the growth of real jobs in the real economy for as long as stable economic conditions are maintained.

The key in regard to jobs is to keep the present rate of growth, 2.5 per cent. or more, going. Raising billions of pounds in windfall tax will cost us some of that growth, just as higher interest rates will. As a result of my policies, growth in the economy has already reduced unemployment by 400,000 since the date when the Chancellor first announced his 250,000 jobs wheeze.

The key point is that unemployment will not fall so fast. That is the measure that we shall apply. It fell by 60,000 according to the last figures that we had, referring to the last month of the previous Government, only a few days ago. Unemployment will not fall so fast if the Chancellor damages growth by raising the tax burden in his June Budget. I should like to know just how far he intends to go in raising that tax burden. As I warned before the election, people will discover more than a windfall tax in the Budget.

Mr. Philip Hope (Corby): How can the right hon. and learned Gentleman claim success for his policies to reduce

unemployment when one person in five in households in this country—and in my constituency—is still out of work, and the thousands who do have jobs are enduring poverty wages?

Mr. Clarke: That includes disabled households, student households and all kinds of people. The key point is that, whichever measure of employment we use—the labour force survey, which the Government will stick to, or the claimant count, which I bet a pound to a penny that the Government will stick to—unemployment has fallen by more than 1 million since the recovery started, and, as I said, it is falling at an extremely rapid rate. It will not fall so quickly if the tax burden is raised on the scale that the leaks about the forthcoming Budget have revealed.

Sir Iain Vallance is one Labour voter who has already repented. I do not know why he took no notice when the Chancellor repeatedly refused to answer a direct question: "Will the tax apply to British Telecom?" With great respect to my friend Iain Vallance, I think that he was a little slow on the uptake in not realising that when he voted Labour, he would be voting for a massive tax hit on his company. It is, however, the other promises that we now hear about—changing the tax treatment of dividends for pension funds, changing the tax treatment of pension contributions by individuals and abolishing the tax relief on mortgage interest. All those have been floated.

Mr. Tom King (Bridgwater): Does not the evidence to support my right hon. and learned Friend's claim lie in the latest unemployment figures, which have just come out and which cover his final term of office? May I say on behalf of my constituents how much they appreciate the fact that in the past year unemployment has fallen by 20 per cent. in my constituency? That is reflected throughout the west of England, and, indeed, in the national figures. Is that not the real, genuine way in which to achieve a lasting improvement in employment?

Mr. Clarke: My right hon. Friend is quite right: that was repeated throughout the country. The current Government will have to live with the test of whether that progress in reducing unemployment can be maintained from now on. I do not believe that it can.

In my anxiety to give way to my right hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater (Mr. King), I glossed over some of the leaks that we have seen in the newspapers about the further tax increases and tax changes that are forthcoming. I shall wait to see how many of those leaks turn out to be justified when the Chancellor comes to the House with his Budget in June, but he is obviously contemplating such changes. If he delivers measures such as those that have appeared in the press, we shall discover how many voters in middle England will soon feel betrayed by the smooth reassurances on tax that the Labour party gave them only a few weeks ago.

The tax raising that the Government are contemplating is so unnecessary. That is their next mistake. The Chancellor may find some friends out there at the Confederation of British Industry—he has taken over my speaking engagement there this evening—but if I were at the CBI, I would say that it is currently a populist fad among some commentators to claim that fiscal tightening is now needed. That is the kind of popular pressure that the Chancellor should resist, because it is usually wrong.

He should tell the CBI this evening that its members are mistaken if they believe that the Governor will not raise interest rates as fast so long as he tightens fiscal policy by raising taxation, because that is not the case. The public finances are on course for a balanced budget in three years at the most. Along with all the other good figures that we have seen recently, the public sector borrowing requirement figures are much better than I expected, and much better than the right hon. Gentleman deserves. The PSBR is falling faster than I forecast only last November.

Why on earth does the Chancellor wish to speed up fiscal consolidation when we are three years away from a balanced budget? I am not alone in saying that. Hon. Members should read an extremely good column by Anatole Kaletsky, which appeared this morning. Anatole Kaletsky is not a Conservative; hon. Members are wrong if they think that he always supported me. Sam Brittan is a Tory: I do not think that he has always voted Tory, but he is a Tory. I could quote him, but let me quote Mr. Kaletsky, who writes that

"it is simply untrue that the Tories have left a mess in the public finances".

and goes on to give his reasons. It is absurd to go back to the argument that tax-raising fiscal measures are some kind of substitute for monetary tightening when a Government are hitting an inflation target.

At this stage, before the Budget, I can only guess at why the Chancellor is charging into all these tax-raising measures within a few weeks, at the expense of the corporate sector, pension funds and middle England, which is what he is doing if half the rumours are to be believed. The reason, presumably, is that he cannot deliver our public spending plans, and there again I have some sympathy with him. I gaze at the Benches behind him, and I know that he cannot deliver our public spending plans. He should never have promised to deliver our public spending plans.

This morning there was an amazing revelation, about which there is no point in saying, "We told you so." However, we warned about it before the election. The Chancellor is looking at the books and the National Audit Office is being brought in to look at the straightforward Treasury-produced figures for the national finances. The Chancellor hopes that the National Audit Office will say, "It is far worse than we expected; all bets are off." The Chancellor will say, "I am sorry I said that I would not have to increase taxes." I shall look with interest to see how such matters are presented in the Budget. The Chancellor is struggling to produce a tax-raising, promise-breaking Budget, and it will damage the economy.

I am taking too long, so I shall try to be brief—*[Interruption.]* Hon. Members will hear more hereafter. Just wait. I am grateful to the new Labour Members for listening so attentively to my words, some of which will be burned upon them in two years as a result of the Government charging ahead with policies such as the independence of the Governor of the Bank of England, a tax-raising Budget and sticking to Tory spending plans, which I am sure does not fill every Labour Back Bencher with delight. The Chancellor is not even doing that correctly.

It is no good saying that there will not be a public spending round in the autumn. The Chancellor has repeated that since the election. I would have had a public

spending round in the autumn. The key is that the right hon. Gentleman says that he will stick to the published total figure. I agree with that and I shall hold him to it. The acid test is whether he can deliver the total public spending figures. It is flattering that the Chancellor says that the figures that we set down for three years are right. If that means saying to every Department, "The previous Government got your figures right for each of the three years," he is heading for total disaster. That is not how it is done.

I delivered total public spending plans for four years. The art of public spending rounds is to deliver the total while responding to events and pressures that cannot be predicted for three years ahead by playing a zero sum game. Our Cabinet used to agree that we were sticking to the total and we delivered it. We had a lively public spending round, with cuts in allocation for some Departments to respond to pressures elsewhere. When I produced the Red Book, I did not say that it contained the precise figures for the next three years for every Department. Every year, I had to change.

I shall give an example. If it becomes obvious in the light of demand that the national health service needs more money next year than we allocated for it in last year's Red Book, I hope that the Chancellor will not expect me to support him and the Secretary of State for Health when they say, "These are the previous Government's figures. That is the full growth and we cannot adjust the totals." The Chancellor will need a public spending round if that occurs, because no one has ever succeeded in forecasting demand in the NHS three years ahead. My right hon. Friend the previous Secretary of State for Health would not have allowed me to make him stick to the figures and I would have had to go to people who are not currently on the Opposition Benches to find the money.

I hope that newly elected Members will forget what was said about health spending during the election. I regret that I missed my old friend the new Secretary of State for Health at the Dispatch Box. I hope that he did not repeat all the rubbish about £100 million to be taken from management to solve all the problems. *[Hon. MEMBERS: "He did."]* I do not know where he thinks he will get the money, but if he does, it represents a quarter of 1 per cent. of total health spending. No doubt my hon. Friends told him that at Question Time. Neither he nor anyone else believes that that amount will solve the problems. If there are health pressures, there will have to be a public spending round, and I do not think that the Government will respond to them.

The Chancellor and the Chief Secretary have set themselves the task of doing what my Chief Secretary and I always achieved. They will have to have a public spending round this year and next year, and the Government will have to face whatever problems arise in health, education, further education, local government, the Prison Service or wherever they occur—and they will. The Government will have to account for delivering the total public spending totals and sorting them out, and they cannot do that. They know that they cannot, and that is why there will be a Budget in June to raise taxes, and the National Audit Office is looking at the figures because the Government never believed a word of what they said in the election. Within 10 weeks, they will try to wriggle out of that.

Mr. Michael Connarty (Falkirk, East): The shadow Chancellor may recall that I once called him the Michael Fish of financial forecasters, because he never got his figures right. Surely he must accept that because of his record, there is a £200 billion public sector national debt. According to him, there was supposed to be a deficit of £15 billion this year and now he says that it will be £23 billion. We on the Government Benches and the people of Britain welcome the discipline that the new Chancellor is exerting on public finances.

Mr. Clarke: Will the Chancellor improve the rate at which the public sector borrowing requirement is dropping while at the same time delivering public spending totals and perhaps keeping to just a fragment of his tax promises at the election? I do not believe he can do that; we shall see in the June Budget.

My final point on public spending is that at the start of the debate on the Gracious Speech, the Prime Minister responded to an intervention by the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes), who is not in his place. The hon. Gentleman asked a killer question: "If all this fails and you need to find extra public money for the public services of health and education, what will you do?" The Prime Minister, in the first flush of his new power and with all the pomp of his new office, acted as he had been acting for years because he was totally unable to answer the question.

I emphasise the other mistake for which we shall hold the Government to account, and it takes me to Europe. *[Interruption.]* It is a decision and, as I said earlier, it means that the Government have at least given us substance for debate. The only decision that the new Government have so far taken in Europe is their acceptance of the social chapter. The one thing on which our industrial and commercial leaders have always agreed with the Conservative party is that the social chapter threatens jobs in a big way. I have already said that many other matters in the Government's programme threaten jobs.

The biggest problem on the continent is unemployment and, as long as we have 1.6 million unemployed, jobs should be at the centre of our debates. There is ever-widening agreement among business men and politicians throughout Europe that the main reason for unemployment remaining so high on the continent, even when the economies achieve growth, is that European countries do not have the flexible labour market of this country. At the moment, Government after Government on the continent are insisting on moving towards flexible labour markets. They intend to deregulate them and make structural reforms. Some are pressing on and doing something about it. The Prime Minister's hero Wim Kok in the Netherlands is deregulating on a grand scale and introducing much greater flexibility.

Common sense and experience show that if the cost of employing someone is raised and it is made more difficult to hire and fire, the chances are that employment will be damaged. The Government are moving directly in the opposite direction and the psychological effect of that in Europe will be bad. We were winning the argument in Europe simply by example, because falling unemployment in this country could not be mirrored there. Our opt-out from the social chapter stopped it growing. It has only two measures, the reason for which is that the other Governments all took to heart Jacques Delors's

warning that all inward investment would come here if they continued in the same direction and we carried on with deregulation.

Unfortunately, Europe's left-wing Governments have been joined by the new British Government, who have thrown their weight on the wrong side of the argument. The Government's decision has caused dismay throughout the business and commercial world in western Europe and among all those who are working out how to compete globally. I expect that they will sign up to a new employment chapter at the Amsterdam summit as well. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for North Durham (Mr. Radice) is barracking me. He knows that for 10 years I have argued with him about flexible labour markets versus the labour legislation of western Europe. He and I agree on quite a lot about Europe, but the real divide between the right of centre and left of centre in Europe turns on the commercial climate and regulation of labour markets and industry that we ought to have.

The hon. Gentleman belongs to the Social Democrat tradition, which approves of the social chapter and believes that so-called "worker protection" legislation is right. He allies himself with those who seek to protect the acquis in the European Union in that area, whereas I belong with those on the centre right who say that that is a mistake, that the atlanticist model of free market economics is more attractive, that if Europe is to hold its own against the world, that is the direction in which the continent must go and that we should now deregulate those matters rather than go in the opposite direction.

The best Finance Ministers in Europe will be worrying about how to avoid their economies being carried back into history by our new Chancellor.

Mr. Radice: The shadow Chancellor and I do agree about many aspects of European policy, which, I am afraid, is not the case with his own party. He quoted Wim Kok. If the social chapter is so devastating, how could Wim Kok deregulate the Dutch economy within the framework of the social chapter?

Mr. Clarke: The social chapter contains two measures and Wim Kok is deregulating the rest. I have not asked him, but I am sure that he is happy with the fact that nobody is bringing forward fresh proposals. However, now that we have joined the social chapter, all those who want fresh proposals—that does not include the Dutch—will start to bring them forward. There is qualified majority voting. I do not have time to go into the Prime Minister's previous belief that he could pick and choose among all those matters. He will be voted down if changes in Government in Europe produce a majority that disagrees with the Labour party's approach to those issues.

What kind of negotiating will take place? An intergovernmental conference will shortly discuss the whole question of whether the treaties are to be amended. I have spent a great deal of time over the past five years—I shall no doubt do so in the next five years—discussing the importance of negotiating. If we are to keep our position in Europe, we must be involved in the events. We must negotiate if we are to get what we want and if our interests and the Union are to go in the right direction. I often say, "Never say never—but never say yes, of course." Before the Government have got near

Amsterdam, they have signed up to the demand put by all their left-wing allies around the table in Europe. They have said, "It's yours." There has been no quid pro quo and, as far as I am aware, no commitment has been made that new proposals will not be made whereby they could be voted down. That is a foolish way to approach the matter.

The Prime Minister will have to go to Amsterdam as "demandeur". We need to make progress on fisheries; we may not need to change the voting system, but we need to change the weight of votes on agriculture and other matters. I hope that nothing else comes up at the IGC. We do not need an IGC at the moment. Consolidating our current position is far more important than any leaps forward at Amsterdam, but the Government will go there having thrown away their negotiating hand.

Those are the mistakes that have already been made in a fortnight. In rushing into those issues, the Government have shown all the signs of inexperienced men and women who are intoxicated with their new power. They are like 18-year-olds in a saloon bar trying out every bottle on the shelf. They are alcopop drinkers today; they will be absinthe addicts tomorrow unless we are very careful.

The Government have massive power. They have the biggest parliamentary majority since the second world war and they control the overwhelming majority of local authorities. They propose to create new Parliaments in Scotland and Wales, which they expect the Labour movement to dominate. Such power is dangerous in the wrong hands and the Government are concentrating it in so few hands. The Cabinet is weak, so there is an inner Cabinet of six people steering all that power. They surround themselves with far too many political and personal appointments. They have people who still act as if they were in opposition and they are charging into mistakes. The whole thing is bathed in the theatrical glow of a synthetic Camelot created by the party's media managers. We shall see how sinister the lighting becomes in the course of time.

The Prime Minister's change to parliamentary questions was a dangerous omen. The trouble is that no Government in modern times have inherited such a legacy of economic growth, improving public finances, low inflation, falling unemployment and healthy trade balances. If the new Government are irresponsible with their heritage and fritter it away, the British people will pay the price.

In opposition, we can only warn, advise and resist. The first quick errors of the new Administration show that we must be tough and resolute in each of those tasks in the interests of our nation if we are to stop the Labour party charging on and doing very great damage indeed.

5.15 pm

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr. Gordon Brown): I do not want to be unkind to the shadow Chancellor, who was making his election speech in the Tory party leadership campaign, but I must ask him why, if things were so good under the previous Government, was the Conservative party so decisively rejected on 1 May? If Britain is doing as well as he says, why is manufacturing investment 8 per cent. less than last year? Why have we inherited manufacturing output that has risen by only 0.5 per cent? Why is a £90 million deficit

predicted for this year? Why are we 21st in the world economic league? Why have we inherited a European policy that was so divided that we must, for the first time, begin leadership in Europe?

Mr. Quentin Davies (Grantham and Stamford): Will the Chancellor give way?

Mr. Brown: I shall give way in a minute.

Mr. Jimmy Hood (Clydesdale): The hon. Gentleman has only just come in.

Mr. Brown: I do not know when the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Mr. Davies) came in, but he was lucky to get back.

Entertaining and wide ranging though the shadow Chancellor's speech was, the country has a right to expect the debate about the Queen's Speech not to be an election hustings for the Conservative leadership. It should be a debate in which we look forward, not backward, and address the long-term challenges of the future. If 1 May signalled anything, it was the British people's determination to move on and get beyond the sterile debates of the past, into which the shadow Chancellor now wants to enter, and to chart a new course for the long term. The electorate recognise that the economic challenges of the next five, 10 or 15 years are to achieve the twin objectives of high and stable growth levels, which were not achieved under the Conservative Government, and high and stable employment levels.

Those were the objectives of a Labour Government in 1945 and they are still the objectives of a Labour Government now. We must meet those objectives in the era of global, not national, markets, ever faster waves of technological innovation and increasingly intense worldwide competition. Whether it is our policies for education, employment or the future of the welfare state, the clear objective of the Government will be to ensure that everyone, not just a privileged few, is equipped to cope with, and reap, the benefits of change.

On 1 May, we inherited a society in which 600,000 young people were out of work and 800,000 men and women were long-term unemployed. That is why, in the first week of government, we authorised the biggest investment in an employment programme that the country has seen, with a new deal for the under-25s. We shall allocate £3 billion to get the young and the long-term unemployed back to work.

Because education is the cornerstone of modern economic success and because every child deserves the best possible start in life, on 15 May, the Secretary of State for Education and Employment announced the start of our education reforms—the Assisted Places Bill, which will redistribute resources in education so that, in future, those who benefit from lower class sizes will be not just the 7 per cent. who go to private schools, but the 93 per cent. who attend state schools, on whom our future depends.

Because our only future in a modern economy depends on high skills and high wages and because we have seen at first hand men and women earning £1, £1.50 and, in some cases, less than £1 per hour that they work, the President of the Board of Trade immediately signalled our intention to establish by law a low pay commission to

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ensure decency and dignity at work—the first national minimum wage in our country. Because fairness in the workplace demands a view of industrial relations not as a conflict between master and servant, as the Conservatives would have it, but as a partnership between employer and employee, the Foreign Secretary has informed Europe that we will sign the social chapter. I believe that that is right for the economy as well as for society.

Some people said that the new Government would make no difference. It is now 18 days since we took office and we have done more to restore faith in the view that the Government can advance opportunities for all in those 18 short days than the Conservatives achieved in 18 long years in government.

Those measures are not simply discrete and unconnected announcements, worthy as they are. Taken together with the new proposals that I have announced today, they represent the first steps in implementing a comprehensive strategy for our country with one aim—to equip men and women to meet the challenges of the future. They arise from an honest appraisal of where we are as an economy and a vision of where we want the economy to be in the years ahead.

Our analysis is that national economic capacity is as yet too small, too technologically unsophisticated and too narrowly based in our industries to meet the global competition in the years ahead. The root cause of that is under-investment in industry, in people and in our infrastructure over many years. That is why our non-oil growth rate under the previous Government was at more than a third less than it was in the 30 years after the war and why we slipped to 21st in the world economic league. From that analysis follows our strategy to build economic success in the future.

In place of short-termism, we have a long-term view—hence the reforms at the Bank of England. In place of stop-go, we have fiscal as well as monetary stability—hence our golden rule for public finances. Instead of the neglect of investment that we see in the figures for last year and every one of the past 18 years, we have a commitment to encourage investment for the long term, hence our new measures for education and training. Instead of the waste of educational talent right across the board, we have a commitment to make our work force the most skilled and educated in Europe. Instead of the old battle for territory between public and private sectors, we want a partnership between public and private to renew our social and economic infrastructure, hence the new boost already given to public-private partnerships.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr. Brown: I shall give way in a moment.

We shall implement a clear and comprehensive strategy to make Britain a more dynamic economy, encouraging the talents that people have, extending education and employment opportunities for all and realising the potential of everyone in our society. Those are policies founded on our historic values, but they are more than ever relevant to a knowledge-based economy.

Mr. Michael Colvin (Romsey): The right hon. Gentleman was talking about the minimum wage. I now

have in my constituency the halls of residence for the university of Southampton. Notwithstanding the fact that our students probably get more money from central Government and local government than any other students in the world, they are dependent upon part-time jobs during their vacations. What will he say to them about the part-time jobs that are currently available to them, admittedly at low rates per hour, which would all go under the minimum wage? What should I tell my students?

Mr. Brown: Those are precisely the issues that will be addressed by the low pay commission. The country will no longer support the philosophy that it is right and decent in a modern society for hundreds of thousands of people to work for £1, £1.50 or £1.75 an hour. The arguments that the hon. Gentleman uses against the minimum wage are exactly those that were used against equal pay for women and to defend child labour, and they were wrong on both occasions. The Conservative party should return to the situation when Winston Churchill, first a Liberal then a Conservative, supported minimum wages. It does the Conservative party no good to be seen to be identifying with exploitative employers who pay the lowest wages possible when we need a modern economy based on decent wages for all.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: The Labour party manifesto says:

"For the next two years Labour will work within the departmental ceilings for spending already announced."

Can the right hon. Gentleman explain to the House and to the country what will happen in education and health if that proves to be inadequate? Is he telling us that there will be no possibility of any transfer into those spending Departments from any savings achieved anywhere else in government?

Mr. Brown: Instead of the irresponsible policies of the Liberal Democrats who, up and down the country, have promised billions for this and hundreds of millions for that, with huge tax rises, we have taken the responsible decision that the first thing that our Ministers will do in health and education is look at how resources are being used currently. Is the hon. Gentleman saying that he can defend a situation where hundreds of thousands of people are losing services in the health service because of the money being spent on administrators? Some £1.5 billion more is being spent on administration now than was being spent in 1990, when the internal market reforms were introduced.

The first thing to do is to scrap the Conservative internal market, which is what we are doing, to use resources now wasted on bureaucracy and put them back into patient care and to end a situation where 12 per cent. of the NHS budget is spent on administration, when it used to be 8 per cent. I would have thought that the Liberal Democrats would have supported our efforts to get greater value for money for patients in the health service.

The hon. Gentleman should also look at the assisted places scheme, where money is going to the few when it should be going to the many. Our reforms in education will change the youth training system. We shall change the student loans and grant system so that we get better value for money and provide better opportunities for students. We shall begin the process of government by

looking at how we can better use available resources. The hon. Gentleman would be doing his cause a better service if he said that the first question must be how to get the best use of available resources.

Mr. Kenneth Clarke: Despite the length of the Chancellor's answer, the question is perfectly clear. The question was whether, within two years, he would increase the departmental spending totals when the Labour party manifesto said that he would not. Is his answer no?

Mr. Brown: That is quite amazing. The shadow Chancellor fought the election on his spending proposals and now, to win the leadership of the Conservative party, he is saying that there should be more health service spending. That is the irresponsibility of opposition. He has said that there should be more health service spending, that interest rates should come down and that he would deliver lower inflation. Those are exactly the sort of promises that the Conservatives made in 1992. The Conservative party is out of power because it makes promises and does not deliver them.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr. Brown: I am happy to spend the whole evening giving way to the different sections of the Conservative party. I shall first take an intervention from a supporter of the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) because that right hon. Gentleman said that he would bring the fun back into politics. That was his selling point in the election. I shall then give way to a supporter of the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague)—a man who is threatening to do for the electoral fortunes of the Conservative party in the United Kingdom what he succeeded in doing for the electoral fortunes of the Conservative party in Wales.

Mr. William Cash (Stone): Will the right hon. Gentleman accept that the real reason why we are in this mess with regard to our future in the European Union is that he and some Conservative Members agreed to the ceilings imposed by the Maastricht criteria which prevent the Government from increasing the totals of public expenditure? Will he go to Amsterdam and renegotiate the treaty to get rid of the impossible situation with regard to the exchange rate mechanism and the movement towards monetary union? Will he also repudiate and resist the requirements of the new draft treaty, which has just been published, with regard to operational expenditure in relation to home affairs, judicial affairs and the common foreign and security policy so that we will not be saddled with the expenses under those pillars?

Mr. Brown: The most significant point made by the hon. Gentleman was that the economy had been left in a mess. Furthermore, his comment reveals that the Conservative Members will continue operating in opposition as they operated in government: divided, indisciplined, and disagreeing among themselves, particularly over the issue of Europe. I suggest that he might have asked the shadow Chancellor those questions on Europe. He might ask for the benefit of the shadow Chancellor's views on Europe before casting his vote in the Conservative leadership election.

The difference between the Conservative party and the Labour party is that Labour has been united in its position on Europe, whereas divisions on Europe are rife among those on the Opposition Front Bench. Those divisions will keep the Conservative party out of power for many years to come.

Mr. Cash: The Chancellor mentioned fun, but the only fun that we have had is watching him avoiding answering the questions that he should be answering. Perhaps he will answer one simple question. During the general election campaign, Labour made a single pledge on the health service—that waiting lists would be cut. If that is so, and given the Chancellor's commitment to departmental spending totals, which does he think is more important: that, in a year's time, waiting lists are not cut, or that spending levels in each Department remain exactly as set? Will he, please, tell us which one is more important?

Mr. Brown: The promise made in the manifesto—which I hope that the hon. Gentleman will read carefully—was that 100,000 extra patients will be treated, by cutting £100 million from national health service bureaucracy. I am pleased to say that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health has already established measures to achieve those important cuts in bureaucracy and administration. I would think more of the hon. Gentleman if, as waiting lists climbed under the previous Conservative Government—to 900,000, to 950,000, to 1 million and beyond—he had complained to that Government's Health Ministers—something that he never did.

Mr. Quentin Davies: The Chancellor really had better decide today whether he wants to make evasiveness the hallmark of his tenure as Chancellor. He has twice been asked a question by Opposition Members that relates directly to his responsibilities—whether, in the next two years, he intends to keep public sector spending totals to the levels in the Red Book, or whether he intends to set and rigidly maintain each departmental total. That is a precise question, it falls directly within his responsibilities, and he cannot evade it. Will he give the House an honest answer?

Mr. Brown: The hon. Gentleman has obviously not read Labour's manifesto. I am also surprised that he has been re-elected to the House. We said very clearly in our manifesto that we shall stick to the departmental ceilings, and I say it again. It is interesting that the shadow Chancellor is more concerned about the windfall tax and protecting the utilities. I am therefore grateful to the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford for raising the issue of the health service. I also ask him which party is more likely to be capable of protecting the health service: the Conservative party, which imposed the internal market and started to ruin the NHS, or the Labour party, which created the NHS?

Four measures in the Queen's Speech affect Treasury responsibility, the first of which concerns work. One in five working-age households have no one earning a wage. The comparable figures are 11 per cent. in the United States, 15 per cent. in Germany and 16 per cent. in France. The figure that we have inherited in Britain is a shameful 19 per cent. How can the shadow Chancellor say that the UK unemployment record of the past 18 years should be

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used as a model for the future? We must face the fact that, in some inner-city areas, a third of young people are out of work. In some parts of inner London, 50 per cent. of young black men are unemployed, and, in some constituencies, 30 per cent. of households have no one earning a wage.

Those figures are the reason why my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment and I decided to visit, as one of our first visits as Ministers, the Foyer project in London. We wanted to see at first hand how local authorities and business can together tackle the problems of youth unemployment and youth homelessness. We want to build on such partnerships.

We must solve the unemployment problem in an entirely new labour market. The days of jobs for life—when most workers were men, manual jobs were the norm and good wages were earned without qualifications, skills or experience—are gone. With a new employment policy, we shall be the first British Government to recognise and act upon the new realities.

We have embarked on several tasks. The first is to move the long-term and young unemployed from welfare into work. The second is to make work pay in the labour market, so that it is worth while to find a job and to stay in one. The third is to establish a skills ladder, so that people out of work can learn skills, those in work can improve skills, and those who are ambitious can advance in new careers, to their own benefit and to the benefit of the economy.

Mr. Edward Garnier (Harborough): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Brown: I shall not give way again.

We believe that those goals, which are central to our programme, can be achieved only by fundamental reform of our approach to welfare, employment and education. The Government will offer young people who have been unemployed for more than six months four options for work or training. The options include an incentive for employers in businesses across the UK to bring the young and long-term unemployed into work, which will be a partnership with business to tackle youth unemployment. There will be four options, but not a fifth option—staying at home on full benefit, doing nothing.

For the most vulnerable in our society—the homeless, the jobless young—we shall introduce proposals to deal with their problems of homelessness, unemployment and social vulnerability. We want to ensure that accommodation for the homeless young is matched by opportunities for them to acquire skills and to work, so that they are once again included in society.
[Interruption.]

I should have thought that Conservative Members, instead of talking among themselves, would be more sensitive to the needs of the unemployed, especially now that some of their best friends are unemployed. I should have thought that Conservative Members who ask about extending employment pilot projects to communities that have suffered unexpected redundancies—such as Enfield, Southgate, for example, or Finchley, or all of Scotland and Wales—would be more sensitive. Now they know the meaning of their statement that unemployment is a price worth paying.

The second challenge of our welfare reform is to make work pay. Half the unemployed who find work become unemployed again within a year. Some of our lowest-paid workers face marginal tax rates of 80, 90 and, in some cases, 150 per cent. For every extra pound that they earn, they lose more than £1—in some cases £1.50—in tax and benefits. They are financially better off unemployed. An unskilled worker can work 40 hours a week instead of none, and, each week, will be pounds worse off. That absurdity must be tackled.

The current system keeps the poor unemployed and the unemployed poor. Willingness to work should never be financially penalised. Just as it is wrong that people at the top keep less because of penal marginal tax rates, it is iniquitous that those at the bottom, who cannot afford it, lose money because of penal marginal tax rates.

Such iniquities are why we want to take action. We shall deal with the benefit traps that lock thousands of men and women, many of whom have young families, into poverty. No longer should we have a Government who blame the unemployed for their poverty, and who simultaneously make those people even poorer if they work. That belief is why we have announced a comprehensive review of the tax and benefit system, to ensure that work can pay for all our citizens. We promised a review in our manifesto, and it will be chaired by Martin Taylor, chief executive of Barclays bank. He and I agree that we want to find a way in which to provide incentives for work, and to enable a change in the penal marginal rates of tax and benefit that hit working people.

Reform of the benefit system without implementation of a national minimum wage would be counter-productive. Without a minimum wage, Governments could waste billions of pounds subsidising employers who—in the sure knowledge that the taxpayer will bail them out—deliberately keep wages low. That is an additional, modern reason for a minimum wage. Only a minimum wage will provide the sure foundation for the tax and benefit reforms that we shall introduce to make work pay. Far from being a job-destroying measure, a minimum wage is an essential component of a constructive strategy to make work worth while and to create jobs.

The third element of our welfare reform is provision of a skills ladder. In 1945, the work force had a reasonable expectation of secure employment for a working life. In 1997, however, most people realise that a working life involves moving between jobs and acquiring new skills throughout that working life. The education legacy bequeathed by the previous Government must be judged against the challenges of the new economy.

In the number of teenagers in full-time education at 18, Britain, with Turkey, is at the bottom of the league of industrial countries. In the UK, 20 per cent. of young people leave school without essential literacy or numeracy skills. Half of the young unemployed do not have basic qualifications. Some 60 per cent. of the long-term unemployed are without skills. At a time when our economy relies more and more on education, there is a huge and growing deficit to make up with our competitors. With our initiatives on education, skills and training, millions of individuals will have new opportunities to participate in the challenges of a growing and changing economy.

All young people between 16 and 18 should be in education or training, whether part time or full time. We shall also make lifelong learning a reality with our proposals—which we want to advance as quickly as possible—for a new university of industry that will bring learning to the home, the workplace and the community. Our individual learning accounts will create the possibility of an improved partnership between individuals who want to learn and employers who want to improve skills. We shall replace the ineffective youth training scheme with two equally valid routes after the age of 16. There will be a college and schools-based route and a work-based apprenticeship and training route. On top of that, our welfare-to-work programme offers work and education opportunities to the young and long-term unemployed. For those reasons, we shall impose the windfall tax on the utilities. If anyone is in any doubt about its necessity, let me make it clear that it is necessary so that we can take action against the inequities that have been bequeathed to us.

The welfare reforms are an essential component of the growth strategy for our country, which needs a medium-term growth strategy. We have world-class firms, but not enough. In many areas we have modern capacity, but there is not enough of it. I want to nurture enterprise and potential productivity so that the good idea in innovation and research becomes the good product and eventually the good export. That is why we must identify and remove the barriers to growth and productivity. The new Minister with responsibility for European competitiveness will be involved in the completion of the single market. The public-private initiative will be given a new boost after the report by Malcolm Bates, formerly the deputy head of GEC.

Those higher levels of long-term investment can be delivered only from a platform of monetary and fiscal stability. Our aim must be never to return to the instability that characterised the Conservative stop-go economics of the past 18 years, causing so much harm to home owners and industry and blighting economic progress.

In order to meet our rules for borrowing, the Budget will establish a sound and long-term basis of public finance, and the foundation for that is honesty. That is why we have invited the head of the National Audit Office, the Comptroller and Auditor General, who is responsible to the House, to comment on some of the key assumptions and conventions that lie behind spending and borrowing estimates so that a truly independent assessment of the state of finances can be made. Before my first Budget, a report incorporating the National Audit Office's views will be published. I envisage that future Budgets will also have a continuing role for the National Audit Office in auditing the prospects for public finances through forecasting.

We have opened the books not only to provide the information that the country has a right to know, but because it is time to rebuild the public's trust about the uses of public money. From next year, we shall publish a Green Paper several months before the Budget containing all the information that the public need.

Together with that honesty in public finance, the Government offer another important change: clarity rather than division in our approach to Europe. When the shadow Chancellor introduced the debate, he talked about everything related to Europe except the issue that divides the Conservative party so completely: the single currency.

In their first week, the Government took positive steps in Europe to protect British interests. The Commission has now stated that it will not proceed with its objection to a cut in VAT on fuel.

The Government will fight for Britain's interests in Europe; we are also clear that there is no future for Britain outside Europe. I know that the shadow Chancellor agrees with me on that. He could not have been clearer in his letter to Conservative Members of Parliament. He said:

"The anti-European position of all the other rivals for the leadership will drive us to the political fringe."

He even compared the directions in which the other five candidates wanted to go to the policies of Newt Gingrich. Conservative Members would be well advised to listen to what the shadow Chancellor said on "The Frost Programme" on Sunday 4 May. He said:

"If the party is led by a Europhile, he is not going to persuade the Eurosceptics to agree with him. If the party is led by a Eurosceptic, he is not going to persuade a Europhile to take a Whip on the big issues. It is a kind of cancer at the heart of the party. Some people are quite obsessed by it. They are quite incapable of agreeing about it at the moment."

That was characteristically frank and an admission that, whoever wins the leadership election—whether a Europhile or a Eurosceptic—he will be unable to unite the Conservative party. Whatever happens, he will be faced with continuous division: a Conservative party that is incapable of being led and a country that would be ungovernable were that party ever to come back to power. Only a Labour Government can pursue our interests in Europe. The Conservative party has a lot of sorting out to do.

Not since 1945 have the British people stated so clearly the need for a change of direction. The last time the British people put their trust in the Labour party with such a powerful national mandate, we created the national health service, a new education service, the welfare state and full employment for a generation. Now, in 1997, as we embark on our task of national renewal, we are conscious of the trust placed in us by the British people—the responsibilities that are imposed upon us and the will of the British people for sensible change.

People voted for us because we were back again as the party of the people and this, the people's Government, will keep their promises. We shall keep our promises to build a stronger and more dynamic economy and to build a united society that deals with the real problems of unemployment, poverty and social division that the Conservative party ignored for too long. Most importantly, we shall restore trust between the people and their Government and restore people's trust in the power of Government to address the concerns that we must face together.

After 18 years, the people of this country now have a Government who are on their side. We have the people's mandate and, in government with the policies that I have suggested today, it is our determination—indeed, our task—to fulfil the people's mandate.

5.45 pm

Mr. Malcolm Bruce (Gordon): We have heard a Chancellor who, in some ways, is still in shadow Chancellor mode; we have certainly seen a shadow Chancellor who is still defending his record as Chancellor. The reality is that the Government have arrived here with

[Mr. Malcolm Bruce]

the biggest majority and the smallest collection of policy commitments with which any Government have ever arrived.

The Chancellor has managed to get his team through the election with a remarkable degree of unanimity but with very little clarification on exactly what will happen. The first thing that happened was something that was not contained in the Labour manifesto, but was clearly stated in the Liberal Democrat manifesto. It is worth noting the difference between the two manifestos. The Liberal Democrat manifesto stated:

"We will turn the Bank of England into a UK Reserve Bank, free from political interference. We will charge the Bank with keeping inflation low and make it accountable to Parliament for achieving this goal. Lower inflation and greater exchange rate stability can better be secured by working with Britain's European partners."

All the Labour party proposed was to reform the structure of the Bank of England; it gave no commitment as to its operational freedom. Therefore, I was not the only one to be surprised. In *The Sunday Times* of 11 May, David Smith said:

"To those who say that new Labour's plans were clear in the manifesto I say nonsense. On April 6, Peter Jay chaired a BBC2 debate between Gordon Brown, Kenneth Clarke and Malcolm Bruce, with the latter lambasting the other two for not having the guts to make the Bank independent. Did Brown put him right? He did not."

On subsequent occasions during the election campaign, when the same debate took place, we had no indication from the then shadow Chancellor that he had any such intention.

I do not wish to be churlish—I welcome the decision and believe that it is in our best long-term interests. It was clearly something that enabled the Government to make a radical new announcement within only 48 hours or so of arriving in power. It slightly belies the Chancellor's claims that this will be a Government of openness, transparency and honesty, when such a major switch of policy is announced to our complete surprise.

It was also interesting to read in the Sunday newspapers that the Chancellor telephoned former Chancellors to inform them of his decision, but the one person whom, apparently, he did not telephone was his immediate predecessor. Perhaps that was because he knew his views already, but in the circumstances it might have been appropriate to contact him.

We have heard ex-Chancellors telling the House that they were in favour of independence for the Bank. At least the immediate ex-Chancellor has been consistent, in that he has not changed his mind yet, although he might have to do so in future as current circumstances continue to prevail. It is interesting that, in the immediate aftermath of the announcement, the views of the former Member for Kingston upon Thames, Mr. Norman Lamont, were solicited by the media. He was driven out of that seat by the local Conservative party because of boundary changes, and the constituency then had the wisdom to elect my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey) to represent it. Mr. Lamont fled to Harrogate, where he was promptly defeated by a Liberal Democrat, so I was astonished that his opinions were as important to the media as they appeared to be.

It may be appropriate to warn the Chancellor that the Liberal Democrats now have a team, instead of only me, with whom to debate economic policy. I assure him that

it is a team to be reckoned with. My hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton is a former economics adviser to our party and will be a formidable addition to our Treasury expertise in the House. In addition, my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) comes to us having been the chief economist of the Shell group, so he, too, has useful experience to contribute to our deliberations. I hope that their contributions will be listened to in a constructive and open manner by the members of the Treasury team. In passing, I should mention my hon. Friend the Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb) who, while not a member of our Treasury team, has an expertise in social security and taxation that will be invaluable, both to us and, I submit, to the House.

The independence of the Bank is the most important issue emerging from the part of the Queen's Speech dealing with economic affairs. There is no question but that we shall support it. We shall, however, probe the Chancellor on several details that were revealed in his statement today. In response to questions from me and other hon. Members, the Chancellor was keen to say that the Court of the Bank of England would represent all sectors and all nations and geographical regions of the United Kingdom. He was equally clear in resisting suggestions that the policy body should be similarly constituted. I give the House notice that a policy body appointed for only three years, of which six members at least are to be appointed by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, raises questions about how much freedom the Bank will have. Clearly, the Chancellor will retain control over the renewal of the contracts of those whom he appoints; no doubt, he will want to hold them to account for their adherence to his policy guidelines. The House might wish to consider whether longer terms would be more appropriate, if the operations of the Bank are to be genuinely independent.

It is also worth noting that the Chancellor probably forestalled making any announcement in advance because he anticipated the very intervention in his statement that he received from the hon. Member for Bolsover (Mr. Skinner). It is clear that there are Labour Members who regard giving control over interest rates to the Bank of England as a major betrayal of socialist interference in the economic management of the country.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): I can speak for myself.

Mr. Bruce: The hon. Gentleman has already spoken for himself. The problem is that he may not be able to deliver enough votes to change the policy.

Mr. Skinner: I do not want the rag, tag and bobtails to speak for me.

Mr. Bruce: The hon. Gentleman is perfectly capable of making his own case and he has already done so. My point is that his intervention gives a clear explanation of why the Chancellor needed to keep this development a closely guarded secret until after the election.

The benefits that will accrue from this policy are fundamentally good. We wholly disagree with the arguments advanced by the shadow Chancellor. The Government will set the inflation target, but interest rates will be set for economic and not political reasons. That should result in lower inflation, lower interest rates and a more stable economy.

It is a fact—one that the shadow Chancellor rather underplayed—that there has been a 0.5 per cent. fall in long-term interest rates since the Chancellor took his decision. It is not good enough for the shadow Chancellor to say that we must not judge the markets' response on the actions of the first couple of days. Their decisions are taken on the basis of judgments on what the long-term underlying rate of interest will be, and it is clear that the markets' judgment is that it will be lower; that has been the experience of all countries that have an operationally independent central bank. The benefit of that approach is that the large national debt that has been bequeathed to the new Government by the outgoing Conservative Government will at least be cheaper to service if long-term interest rates are lower. That will help us to bring down public borrowing—something that the Conservatives will eventually welcome.

If the Conservatives persist in opposing this measure, they will make fools of themselves, because they will be putting themselves outside mainstream thinking in every advanced economic discipline in the world. There is no country among the major economies, other than Japan, that continues the role of political interference in its central bank. Indeed, if the Conservative party maintains its position—the Chancellor understandably pressed Conservative Members on that point—it could be that, in the approach to the next general election, the markets will get the jitters at the possibility of the election of a Conservative Government who could undermine the economy's stability. I hope that the Conservatives will come around to conventional wisdom and common sense.

The Gracious Speech contains a commitment to ensure that public borrowing is controlled. The Chancellor is aware of the huge debts amassed by his predecessors over the past decade and much was made of that problem during the election campaign. He is right to take action to bring down that deficit and he will have our support in doing so. He should not rush into reform of the personal taxation system so soon after the election, especially in light of the debate during the campaign and his own promises. He needs to allow time for proper consideration of such changes. Nevertheless, speedy action to reduce the deficit is necessary and will be welcome.

Recent figures suggest that public borrowing is falling rather faster than planned. It should be, because the economy is growing quite quickly and the public sector borrowing requirement is still far too high. The shadow Chancellor's claim that he got it right is open to question. Even if he did get it right, we have all paid a premium for his right to interfere. Now is the time for the Chancellor to try to resolve the problem of the deficit for good, while the economy is strong. He and I have both said that we basically support the golden rule as a principle of sound public sector finance, but to apply the golden rule one has to eliminate the short-term current account deficit. I hope that he agrees that that is an overriding priority.

We might even be able to reduce the deficit to as little as £10 billion within the next financial year. That would strengthen our ability to weather future economic storms and lower long-term interest rates still further. It would help to reduce the need to boost short-term interest rates in order to control inflation and offset upward pressures on the exchange rate. I suggest that the shadow Chancellor knows that to pray in aid the exchange rate is not an entirely honourable argument, when it is domestic pressures that are creating inflation within the economy.

One of the reasons why the exchange rate has risen is the markets' belief that, when he was Chancellor, he was operating an interest rate policy that would require further increases in future, in spite of his protests to the contrary.

We need to maintain strict financial discipline, which is why my intervention on the Chancellor, which was backed up by the shadow Chancellor, is so important. If the Chancellor—he clarified this point in the end—is to stick to his manifesto commitment to maintain spending for the next two years within the outgoing Government's departmental spending limits, he has given himself a straitjacket that will cause massive tensions within the Labour party and that has the potential to cause great disappointment among those who wanted real improvements in health and education spending. I have to tell him that, having made his position so abundantly clear, there is no going back.

I shall return to that subject, but first I shall dwell on what the Gracious Speech says about monetary union, which the Chancellor mentioned in passing, but not head-on. The speech says that the Government

"will play a full part in the debate about Economic and Monetary Union."

That is a rather thin statement of the Government's position. Companies are waiting to take serious decisions on that matter, and they are entitled to hear more about the Government's policy. They are at least entitled to know when the Government intend to take a decision on first-wave entry.

The business community needs clarification of the Government's position on monetary union, not least because investment decisions on computers and cash machines must be taken now, and there is obviously growing demand from the business community for answers to such questions.

The Liberal Democrats' position is clear. We believe that, if monetary union goes ahead on time, if the founder countries meet the convergence criteria, if Britain meets those convergence criteria and if the decision to join is backed by a positive vote in a referendum of the British people, it is in the British national interest to be founder members of European monetary union.

The Government's position is much less clear. During the general election campaign, the present Chancellor refused to set out clearly the terms on which he would recommend entry into monetary union. Once, on "Channel 4 News", he and I got slightly physical about that matter, because he was anxious to challenge the then Chancellor but not to answer questions. That characteristic does not appear to have changed, despite his accession to office.

We need a clear steer now. Do the Government categorically rule out joining monetary union in 1999 under any circumstances? If that is the case, would they join in 2001, or would they join later? What policy will they pursue in the meantime? Will they shadow the euro? Will they strive to achieve criteria to allow early membership? If they will, what will those criteria be?

I hope that the Chancellor will accept that that is a matter of interest not only to Liberal Democrats. All the people engaged in business in this country need to know the answers to plan for the future. We need a clear statement whether, in principle, the Government believe that EMU can succeed, if and when Britain should be part

[Mr. Bruce]

of it and what conditions will need to be met. I hope that the Deputy Prime Minister can clarify matters when he replies to the debate.

It would be helpful to have an idea of when we may receive a statement on the Budget date. The widely canvassed date of 10 June would require an announcement before the recess, and sooner rather than later. The Chancellor owes us a clear indication on that matter.

I return briefly to the issue of tax and spending, because the Government must explain how they justify their ambitious aims for the education system, for our national health service, for welfare reform and to tackle poverty. The Government are making big claims. The language is robust, and many people are responding with enthusiasm to the Government's expressed aims, but how will those aims be achieved?

If the Government are determined to stay within departmental spending limits, their education policy and their claims and aspirations cannot be met. In our judgment, it is impossible to achieve class sizes of fewer than 30 for five, six and seven-year-olds by using the proceeds of abolishing the assisted places scheme: the figures do not add up. In fact, the time scale involved in introducing that scheme means that class sizes are likely to continue increasing before they can be reduced, and as there is no commitment to reducing class sizes for seven, eight, nine and 10-year-olds, those class sizes will continue to increase throughout the present Parliament.

Equally, it is difficult to believe that a serious reduction in NHS waiting lists can be achieved by saving £100 million on bureaucracy, even if that can be readily delivered, and in those circumstances it is difficult to envisage how the Government's claims on the NHS can be delivered. Despite the Government's manifesto pledges, class sizes will continue to increase, national health service waiting lists will continue to lengthen for the next two years and the rest of the Parliament will be spent on reversing the damage caused by the Government's inability to fund their promises in the first two years. That is a recipe for a betrayal of all those people who voted Labour at the general election because they believed that things would get better in our schools and hospitals. In those circumstances, those aims simply cannot be achieved.

If the Chancellor is going to spend the first half of the Parliament allowing the situation to deteriorate and the second half retrieving the damage, how, by the end of the Parliament, will he have delivered on his commitment to put education at the top of the priority list and to deliver a radically reformed national health service? No wonder the Secretary of State for Health has made such colourful comments about the inheritance that he has come into on arriving in his Department.

The Labour leadership—and the Chancellor in responding to my earlier intervention—made a similar response, denouncing the Liberal Democrats' manifesto position. In our manifesto, we stated clearly and categorically not only our priorities—which were much more ambitious on health and education than the Government's—but how they would be paid for, knowing that people wanted those improvements in public services and would not believe that they could be delivered

without a clear commitment on where the money would come from. That is what we did, and that is what Labour did not do.

It is not good enough for the Chancellor—or the Prime Minister—to denounce irresponsibility by the Liberal Democrats, when he is unable to deliver, in significant terms, any serious improvement on health and education. On the first day of the debate on the Loyal Address, the Prime Minister accused the Liberal Democrats of an

"addiction to rather peculiar tax-raising powers".—[*Official Report*, 14 May 1997; Vol. 294, c. 66.]

I presume that by "peculiar tax-raising powers" he means our proposals to fund better education out of a small and targeted increase in income tax. Is income tax really such a "peculiar" tax-raising power? Do the Prime Minister and the Chancellor not know that £72 billion in income tax will be collected by the Government in the coming financial year, which, by a factor of almost 50 per cent., is the largest single source of Exchequer revenue? So what is so peculiar about that form of tax? Is it not a fair and progressive tax, and readily understood by all who pay it?

It is the Prime Minister who, with his Chancellor, is committed to peculiar taxation. They are committed to retrospective taxation that seeks to change the terms on which the Government struck a deal with the private sector: retrospective taxation that hits many of those who have not experienced the super-normal gains that the Exchequer seeks to tax; retrospective taxation on monopoly utilities which, in some cases, are neither utilities nor monopolies—no doubt Iain Vallance thought that he was heading up one of those when he voted Labour—retrospective taxation that pretends to tax windfalls gained by the few, but that actually taxes the pensions of the many; retrospective taxation that seeks to fund multi-year programmes with one-off revenue.

It is the Labour party that is addicted to "peculiar" tax-raising powers. If it is the "windfalls" of the utilities today, why are we to believe that it may not be the "windfalls" of other firms or individuals tomorrow? Liberal Democrats oppose dishonest and unfair taxation, so we oppose the windfall tax and we shall expose the cost of that tax on pensions and its opportunism.

The test of the Government will be, not the good intentions that they set out or the small measures that they can deliver, but the progress made in transforming our education system into a first-class state system of which we can all be proud, the measures taken to improve our public health provision and the concrete steps taken to make a reality of a society of opportunity for all.

The Labour Government have arrived in power saying that they will keep their promises, but they have made so few promises that they will not be able to fulfil the aspirations of people who want their services to be improved. We wish them well, but we have grave reservations as to whether they will be able to deliver.

6.9 pm

Mr. Robert Sheldon (Ashton-under-Lyne): The hon. Member for Gordon (Mr. Bruce) rightly welcomed the widening of interests of the members of the Court of the Bank of England. It does indeed have a very narrow base and it must be widened. I look forward to much greater representation from the different parts of the country and its industrial life.

The most important part of the Queen's Speech was the commitment to growth and employment. That was reinforced by what the Chancellor said today. The Queen's Speech stated:

"The central economic objectives of my Government are high and stable levels of economic growth and employment . . . They will aim to deliver high and sustainable levels of growth and employment by encouraging investment in industry, skills, infrastructure and new technologies".

These are certainly the key issues facing the Government, and I am encouraged to find them given such prominence in the Queen's Speech.

The Chancellor's decision to grant some independence to the Bank of England is critical. I see that decision in the context of economic and monetary union. The problems of implementing EMU are great, and they are known. In particular, the harnessing together of widely differing economies and conditions would usually be regarded as an insuperable problem, but it is now clear that the will to succeed is so great that countries with respectable standards of economic integrity are proceeding to cook the books so as to meet the Maastricht criteria. We know that those criteria were arbitrary and were formed at a time when the economic problems of the past few years were not so clear as they have subsequently become.

Far from devising new and perhaps more sensible criteria, it seems that the forces of action in this area are now becoming unstoppable. That was highlighted by Germany's willingness to revalue its gold holding to meet the EMU criteria. We always knew that Italy would be the great book cooker. France, with its assets sale, has also affronted EMU principles. That did not greatly surprise us, but Germany—the protector of financial rectitude and integrity—has certainly surprised us by entering the murky world of financial compromise.

I have always been less than convinced that the Bundesbank had much to do with Germany's economic success. The cause of its success was always the industrial might of German industry, with its technically educated work force and highly qualified management. It was industry that made for success, and the Bundesbank merely followed in its wake. The Bundesbank was not the cause of Germany's economic success—it was the beneficiary of it. Nevertheless, it gained Germany a reputation for extreme financial prudence and the tarnishing of that reputation is highly significant. Those countries are determined to proceed with EMU, and on the timetable that has already been set.

The question for us, then, is to adjust to the clear expectation and determination of those countries which are throwing in their lot with EMU. On that basis, I understand the Government's decision to grant some sort of independence to the Bank of England. I do not believe that the Bank's record has been above criticism. In any discussions between the Governor and the Chancellor, their roles have always been clear: a Chancellor may underrate the threat of inflation for political purposes, but the Governor will always exaggerate it—so it has proved over the past few years, and it is always likely to remain so.

I should have liked EMU not to proceed—or if it did, to have a long delay to prepare for it as economies converge in the early years of the next century. Such delay now appears highly unlikely. What worries me is the prospect of Europe proceeding without Britain, making

decisions that will greatly affect us without our being part of that decision making. Our economy is increasingly geared to Europe, so we must decide whether to throw in our lot with our partners or whether to stand aloof.

In this context, the decision to give the Bank its independence is understandable. There are a number of safeguards—particularly in the form of the possibility of reviewing the financial arrangements of the Bank. The letter from the Chancellor to the Governor stated:

"The Bank of England will make reports to and give evidence to the House of Commons, through the Treasury select committee, on an enhanced basis, and I will write to the chairman of the committee."

I am not sure what that "enhanced basis" is. Perhaps the Deputy Prime Minister will give me an answer to that question.

I should like the Select Committees to be set up as soon as possible. In its last report at the end of the previous Parliament, the Liaison Committee asked that they be set up quickly, even if they are not complete in all respects. It is important not to wait several months, especially as so many of these matters need to be referred to the Committees.

I was interested to learn that the Public Accounts Commission is to have a role. The Chancellor of the Exchequer has said that the National Audit Office will report on the assumptions and conventions underlying the Treasury. I recall that in about 1984, after I had become Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee, the Treasury suggested that it might do an efficiency audit of the National Audit Office. I responded by saying that that was a good idea, but that perhaps the NAO should first do an efficiency audit of the Treasury. We never heard anything more.

Now the National Audit Office is being brought in to scrutinise the assumptions and conventions of Treasury forecasting. That is a sensible way to proceed. The National Audit Office has been one of the most successful parliamentary institutions of recent years and the Comptrollers and Auditors General—Sir Gordon Downey and later Sir John Bourn—have been enormously important in maintaining standards in the public service and accountability in public finances.

I am not sure what is to happen to the reports emanating from the National Audit Office questioning certain aspects of the Treasury's activities. Perhaps we shall hear Ministers' thoughts on that later.

The critical decision for entry to EMU will be the rate of the pound on entry. Exports are undoubtedly suffering, and the target of 2.5 per cent. for inflation has been met only because the cost of imports has fallen by about 15 per cent. in the past year. That has helped enormously to sustain the target of 2.5 per cent. If we get the entry rate for the pound too high, we may begin our membership at a severe disadvantage, leading to deflation at home while other countries begin their expansion under the new rules.

After Black Wednesday, the pound declined to DM2.30, with enormous consequential advantages to our exports. It is difficult to envisage a rate of that sort following entry into the European monetary union. I would hope for a rate of about DM2.50. I know that the negotiations will be difficult, but the Government's aim should be clear.

I was particularly encouraged by what my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer said about investment. There is undoubtedly an important role for

[Mr. Robert Sheldon]

the tax system in increasing investment opportunities. We have a system not of investment incentives, but of investment disincentives. If someone buys a capital product, for every £1,000 of that cost he receives £250 as his initial allowance. Few capital items are worth 75 per cent. of their initial value at the end of the first year, so the person loses money in the first year and is not compensated by the tax system. The allowance is not even set on the basis of equality: there is a loss.

I want an investment incentive that encourages people to invest more. I know the arguments that the best investment is based on the need to get something out of the article that the person is procuring, but even when that happens the investor should get some encouragement, which can come from the tax system.

Another matter that I feel should be raised, particularly at the beginning of a Parliament, is mortgage interest relief at source—MIRAS. During the campaign and in the weeks since then, we have heard of the need to plan for two Parliaments. I hope that we shall be able not only to plan for that, but to achieve it. The scope for effecting change during one Parliament is considerable, but it is not enough for certain areas in which we might wish to bring about change. Some planning decisions need longer time scales. That time is required to bed in the changes as well as to present certain programmes which require longer to introduce. Foremost among those must be the further reduction of mortgage interest relief.

Over several Governments, housing was turned into a national investment. People were led to believe that house investment was better than productive investment, and so it proved in those years—to our great disadvantage. Tax relief was handed out with serious consequences for stability in the housing market. Beyond a certain minimum level, housing should be regarded as an expenditure, not an investment. If we are able to enjoy the concept of planning for a long period ahead, as I hope that we may be able to do, we should consider mortgage interest relief. It should be phased out over a long enough period of years not to have too dramatic an effect on the expectations of people taking out mortgages. Lower interest rates will reduce the benefit in any case, so there is a possibility of phasing it out over a long enough period, which should not prove too painful.

We have all been impressed by the work of the Scottish and Welsh regional development agencies, which have been so successful that other parts of the country consider themselves disadvantaged. The main benefit lies in the responsibility that can be given to the regions in determining an important part of their industrial future. Bringing together people who have knowledge, interest and understanding has been valuable in Scotland and Wales and I expect to see similar benefits in the regions. However, the immediate event that we await is the first of what I am sure will be many Budgets from my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer. The task that he will face is to reduce the public sector borrowing requirement as well as to provide some finance for some of the expenditures that he will need to prepare for in the second year of this Government. The role of my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury will be critical. His position is one of the most difficult of all. Following

this initial period, I look forward to his preparing some transition from a hair shirt to one made of some serviceable calico.

The Government have made an energetic start. I think that we all appreciate that. Over the next few years, the tempo may be reduced a little, but I am confident that their vigour and vision will be maintained.

6.24 pm

Sir John Stanley (Tonbridge and Malling): I should like to devote my remarks to the European affairs part of the debate. The Chancellor of the Exchequer, who is no longer in his place, predictably had a limited amount of fun—no doubt he could not resist it—with the difference of view in the Conservative party in relation to the negotiating position on the single currency. However, on the issue immediately facing us, which is of the most profound significance—our negotiating position at the Amsterdam intergovernmental conference summit—the Conservative party is wholly united in its opposition to surrendering our opt-out from the social chapter, in not making further surrenders of our rights of veto, and in its overall approach to that critical conference.

As this Parliament evolves, and if we do get further European treaty legislation following the IGC, it will be interesting for us Conservative Members to see whether the Labour party in government is as seriously split on the new treaty legislation as it most certainly was in relation to the Maastricht legislation in the previous Parliament.

I wish to make this point on the European treaty. This is no reflection on either of the two Front-Bench teams; it is simply a matter of the conjunctions of timing. We are now less than four weeks away from the Amsterdam summit, when that profoundly important treaty will be decided. There has been inadequate parliamentary scrutiny and parliamentary accountability in advance of that critical summit.

No Select Committees of the House have been set up, the new draft of the intergovernmental conference treaty, which is about one inch thick in my estimate, was available only last Friday and with the best will in the world few, if any, hon. Members will have been able to give it the detailed and intense scrutiny that it most certainly requires. In this debate, important economic issues and equally important European issues are being dealt with simultaneously. In terms of parliamentary accountability, it is essential that before the Amsterdam summit there should be at least another full day's debate on the IGC summit so that hon. Members have the opportunity to put their views to the House before the summit takes place, particularly as Madam Speaker said at the start of this debate that, sadly, some Members who are seeking to catch your eye, Mr. Deputy Speaker, may not be called.

The most critical issue in the new treaty, which contains some of the most far-reaching provisions, is the extent to which the British Government further surrender our rights of veto at the Amsterdam summit. I am not in any way detracting from the other critical issues in the treaty: the extent to which it proposes far-reaching new competences for the European Union; the proposals substantially to increase the powers given to the European Parliament; the extremely radical proposals for bringing about greater Community involvement in the foreign

affairs and security pillar; and the even more radical proposals in the home affairs and administration of justice pillar. So far as this Parliament is concerned, however, I believe that the critical issue will be the extent to which the present Government do or do not sign up to further surrenders of our rights of veto, particularly in the areas at present covered by unanimity.

It cannot be stressed too strongly how crucial in constitutional, legal and policy terms a decision to surrender our right of veto in a given policy area is. It is crucial, first, because each surrender is irreversible in practice. There has been no case, to my knowledge, in which a move from unanimity to qualified majority voting has ever been reversed since the European Union came into being—and here I am going back to the formation of the EEC.

Once the right of unanimity is surrendered, in effect it takes away from the elected British Government the ability to say no to a particular policy area and framework of law which applies in that policy area. In addition, it opens up for the indefinite future the possibility of further directives which the elected British Government will have no powers to resist if they do not have the votes under the qualified majority voting system.

During the election campaign I listened extremely carefully to what the right hon. Member for Sedgefield (Mr. Blair) said about the circumstances in which a Labour Government, if elected, would further surrender our rights of veto. He said that he would not surrender the veto in a limited number of stated areas. He referred to tax, defence and security, immigration, EU budget contributions and treaty changes. That was clear. Important as they are, however, those five areas represent only a fraction of the total policy areas involved. All the rest was left open.

The right hon. Gentleman, now the Prime Minister, said that he would be prepared to surrender our rights of veto and move from unanimity to qualified majority voting if he believed that it was in our national interest to do so. Against the background that I have outlined, I find it difficult to believe that there can be any areas in which it could be in the British national interest to make further surrenders of our rights of veto, unless and until a very substantive concession was obtained in return; those are the only circumstances in which I believe that it could be justifiable to make a further surrender of rights of veto—hypothetically, at any rate.

I find it poor on the part of the new Government that on their first visit to the European institutions they have made a wholly unconditional surrender of our opt-out from the social chapter without getting anything whatever in exchange. That was negotiating naivety in the extreme.

I want to make three points about the social chapter. First, at no time in the election campaign or in the run-up to the election did I hear Labour Members explaining that their commitment to surrender the opt-out from the social chapter involved not merely one surrender, but two. First, obviously, by surrendering our opt-out we are bringing within the ambit of Community decision making and Community law an area of policy which is at present the exclusive preserve of the United Kingdom.

The second surrender arises because it is clear from protocol 14 of the social chapter that there are two types of procedure for different subject heads. One of those areas is covered already by qualified majority voting.

The process of surrendering our opt-out from the social chapter means not merely substituting Community law for what would effectively be an exclusive right of national law but at the same time surrendering our rights of direct control in those areas and replacing them by a qualified majority voting system.

I remind the House what those areas are in which the very act of surrendering the social chapter opt-out brings QMV into effect. Those areas are extremely wide-ranging and cover

"workers' health and safety; working conditions; the information and consultation of workers; equality between men and women with regard to labour market opportunities and treatment at work"

and

"the integration of persons excluded from the labour market"

which, I am told, is Eurospeak for rights for the unemployed. I list those to indicate the breadth of the areas that the surrender of the opt-out from the social chapter already brings within the QMV system in which, of course, the British Government have no right of veto.

My second point relates to the other subjects in protocol 14—those which are subject to the decision-making process by unanimity. Do the Government intend to surrender to existing pressures and to exchange unanimity in that part of the social chapter for qualified majority voting? Will that be one of the areas in which they will surrender our rights of veto? Those areas, too, are profoundly significant and include

"social security and social protection of workers; protection of workers where their employment contract is terminated; representation and collective defence of the interests of workers and employers"

and

"financial contributions for promotion of employment and job creation".

Those are enormously wide areas, which could be the subject of later directives. A critical policy issue, therefore, is whether the Government will end up, after the Amsterdam summit, having conceded not merely our opt-out from the social chapter, but qualified majority voting throughout protocol 14.

That brings me to the third point about the surrender of the social chapter opt-out: the implications for the future. It is true that so far only two directives have come into effect under the social chapter. One is the works councils directive; the other is the parental leave directive. I found the parental leave directive particularly interesting. Having taken advice on it, I wonder how many employers in the United Kingdom realise that under that directive, in the case of employees who have a child, employers will be under an obligation to allow both parents to have not less than three months leave from their place of work. That is a significant and interesting point.

Beyond that, there is the question of what further directives will be issued under the social chapter. A directive that is already considerably advanced will shift the burden of proof in sex discrimination cases so that it falls in part on the employer—requiring the employer to prove a negative in such cases. That has significant legal implications. Another directive that is quite far advanced deals with rights for part-time workers and temporary workers. That has the capacity to produce a serious loss of job opportunities among those currently in part-time or temporary work.

[Sir John Stanley]

The issue is not whether those areas of legislation are desirable or not. They are all grounded in national legislation. The Government have decided that they no longer want to rely on national legislation in those areas. However, I put it to the House that national legislation can deal with those matters perfectly satisfactorily. By surrendering our opt-out, we are telling the EU that it may take over legislating in those areas—and, ultimately, the European Court of Justice rather than the British courts will be the determining body when directives are issued. That is why I believe that it is a profound change.

The issue of surrendering our right of veto applies not simply to the social chapter, but much more widely. There is no doubt that the Commission and some of our EU partners have substantial ambitions in that area. It is significant that in February this year the Commission published a paper entitled "Extension of Qualified Majority Voting", which listed 18 new areas where unanimity could be replaced by qualified majority voting. The Government have said that they might be willing to surrender unanimity and replace it with qualified majority voting in two of those 18 areas: the industrial and the environmental areas. Such a change to the industrial chapter would have profound implications for businesses in this country. The introduction of qualified majority voting would also have profound implications for certain parts of the environment chapter, which is currently subject in part to unanimity.

Article 130s lists the environmental articles that remain subject to unanimity, including town and country planning. If unanimity were surrendered in that area and replaced by qualified majority voting and the Commission agreed—possibly against the wishes of the elected British Government—to produce an EU directive on town and country planning which would bite in Labour Members' constituencies, I wonder how pleased they would be about the surrender of the veto undertaken by their Government at Amsterdam. That illustrates the scale and importance of the issues at stake.

The Government have said that they will support the proposed new employment chapter. The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne, North (Mr. Henderson), has set out clearly the Government's overall negotiating position. I refer to a Reuters press release issued after the Minister's first visit with his European colleagues. It said:

"Henderson said Labour would end the British opt-out from the EU's Social Chapter, agree to more qualified majority voting in some policy areas and support an employment chapter in a new EU treaty to be adopted in mid-June in Amsterdam."

I put it to the House that the package of surrenders that the Government propose—surrendering our opt-out on the social chapter, replacing our existing rights of unanimity with qualified majority voting in key areas such as industry and environment, and accepting the existing employment chapter—has potentially damaging consequences for industry in this country, affecting investment, costs, labour market flexibility and competitiveness. If the Government go down that route, the British people will ultimately pay the price with their jobs.

6.44 pm

Ms Ruth Kelly (Bolton, West): Mr. Deputy Speaker, it is a great privilege to have the opportunity to make my maiden speech so early in the parliamentary Session.

In speaking to the House for the first time, I am conscious of the honour bestowed upon me by the people of Bolton, West in electing me as their Member of Parliament. I am also proud to be joined in the House by two other new Members of Parliament, my hon. Friends the Members for Bolton, North-East (Mr. Crausby) and for Bolton, South-East (Dr. Iddon). It is the first time since Bolton has been represented by three Members of Parliament that all three are Labour Members. It is now truly a Labour town, and I hope that it will stay that way for many years.

I begin by paying several tributes. I first pay tribute to my immediate predecessor, Mr. Tom Sackville. Hon. Members will undoubtedly remember him as a loyal and faithful servant of the House, who made his mark on his party and served as a Minister in more than one Department. He was also admired in Bolton for his attention to local issues, particularly his determination to pursue university status for Bolton institute of higher education—a cause with which I, too, hope to be associated; albeit with greater success. A university for Bolton would bring great honour to the town and its people.

I pay tribute also to Mr. Sackville's predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Dewsbury (Mrs. Taylor). She was first elected as Labour Member of Parliament for Bolton, West in October 1974, and represented the area for nine years. She is remembered with great affection in Bolton as a good constituency Member, who was able to combine a high profile on the national scene with a readiness to deal with constituents' problems. I am delighted to see that, as the right hon. Member for Dewsbury, she has maintained a prominent position on the Labour Front Bench, and is now Leader of the House. I congratulate her on that appointment.

As well as being remembered fondly by her former constituents in Bolton, my right hon. Friend remains a great fan—and season ticket holder—of Bolton Wanderers football club. Having taken in one record-breaking landslide recently, hon. Members may have missed the result achieved by the Wanderers in gaining promotion to the Premier league, scoring 100 goals and narrowly missing 100 points. I take this opportunity to wish them every success next season.

Bolton, West is in many ways a misleading name for a constituency comprising mainly small towns and villages to the west of Bolton rather than the town itself. Deane-cum-Heaton ward around Bolton school and along the Chorley new road contains some fine residential areas. The 19th-century mansions of Bolton's textile magnates can still be seen—some of them still in use as family homes. Bolton was a mill town, and, like many parts of the United Kingdom, mirrored the west-east divide between those who profited from spinning cotton on Crompton's mule—a machine invented by one of Bolton's favoured sons—and those who formed the bulk of the work force.

The industrial and employment base of the constituency was broadened when parts of the old Westhoughton constituency were incorporated into Bolton, West in the 1983 boundary changes. The town's top residential areas

in Deane-cum-Heaton were joined by three small towns: Horwich, Blackrod and Westhoughton. Horwich was renowned for its locomotive industry, and Westhoughton and Blackrod for their textiles, mining and agricultural industries.

In many ways, the economy of Bolton, West is a microcosm of what has happened to the British economy in the past 18 years. Its great industrial heritage was wiped out in the booms and busts of the Thatcher years, while the service sector jobs that sprang up in its wake were mainly part-time, insecure and poorly paid.

Many of my constituents are employed in defence-related industries—and we are all aware of what is happening to them as a result of the end of the cold war. Their plight was made worse by the neglect of a Government who undertook no strategic review of Britain's defence needs, and had no policy of diversification to preserve much-needed skills. At the time of the last election in 1992, more than 1,600 people were employed at British Aerospace at Lostock; now there are only 500.

The problems of Bolton, West today are similar in many ways to those faced by the people who lived there a century ago: the divisions, inequality and social fragmentation remain. Unemployment, especially among young people, scars the landscape. The north-west of England has the highest level of youth unemployment in the country. In the west of Bolton, Horwich, Westhoughton and Blackrod, over 1,500 young people under the age of 25 are neither in work, education nor training. That is one reason why I was delighted to see prominence given in the Gracious Speech to Labour's commitment to take 250,000 young people off welfare and return them to work.

The towns have also suffered as a result of the Conservative Government's courting of the fat cats, at the expense of ordinary people. Brian Staples, the chief executive of United Utilities, took home £405,000 last year, an 864 per cent. increase on his pre-privatisation salary. At the same time, an analysis of job vacancies advertised at jobcentres by the Greater Manchester low pay unit showed that 15 per cent. of all jobs advertised offered wages of less than £2.82 an hour; over 70 per cent. were offered at £3.58 an hour or less.

Last year, when the survey was undertaken, the national insurance threshold was reached only by those in four out of 10 jobs. Half of all jobs advertised paid below the single person's tax threshold. Indeed, last month, one job was advertised in Bolton at £70 a week as a general labourer—the hours, 42 a week. In other words, the rate was £1.67 an hour.

The Gracious Speech contains many proposals which, if implemented, will be of great benefit to my constituents. I am honoured to be part of a Government who are committed to introducing a national minimum wage that will end the exploitation of workers. Many of us in the House will recognise that employers have a responsibility to pay a just wage. Those employers who pay only the level of wages that the labour market demands, however low, are avoiding their moral responsibilities for the welfare of their employees. That effect was widely recognised in my constituency during the election campaign.

Labour's proposed low pay commission will bring together representatives from both sides of industry. It will make proposals to fix the level of a minimum wage,

a wage that will enable many people to regain self-respect as they make a vital contribution to the health of the nation's economy.

There is a new mood in the country, and I am confident that the minimum wage will be accepted by employers as well as by the work force as a significant step in rendering our society a moral one, of which we can all be proud. The Government begin their administration with a determination to govern for the many, not just the few. It is now time to start rebuilding Britain as one nation. I look forward to playing my small part in the task that lies ahead.

6.52 pm

Mr. Martin Bell (Tatton): I hope that it is appropriate for one new Member to pay tribute to a truly excellent speech by another, the hon. Member for Bolton, West (Ms Kelly).

I have had one or two semantic difficulties with one of the traditions of the House, but I think that I have resolved them. I wish to pay tribute to my predecessor for the work that he did on behalf of his constituents and for the effect that he had, whether deliberately or not, in reviving the spirit of democracy in Tatton, which has recently experienced a general election campaign unlike any other in its history, and a little unlike any other in the country.

My predecessor and I are very different people, but one thing that we have in common is a great love for a beautiful part of Cheshire. That love extends to its valleys, its villages and its landscape, which is now threatened in one part by the onward march of concrete.

One other thing that I have in common with my predecessor is that we both came to this beautiful place from somewhere else—he from Wales and I from Suffolk. We love this place with the zeal and attachment of a convert.

I am in this place for but one term. I am perhaps the least intentional Member, but not the least determined. It would seem to me appropriate if at one time it might be thought possible for the Cross Benches to be ruled to be a part of the full Chamber. Such a ruling would certainly give me somewhere appropriate to sit. I think that it would send a signal to those in the country who want less confrontational politics. In my time here, I wish to serve my constituents fully and to do something to bring to bear my experience from another world in rattling around the war zones and the lessons that that taught me.

There seems not much point in going through those ordeals unless one learns something from them. There are lessons such as the fact that good and evil are not abstractions, but are actual forces in the world, and that the difference that an individual can make is greater now than it was in the more predictable world of the old cold war. It is a difference that perhaps even a Member of this place can make.

How can that difference be made? Perhaps, for a start, it can be made by supporting the Government's initiative to end the curse and scourge of land mines throughout the world. Of all Members of this place, I am probably the one who has been closest to land mines in the past years. Indeed, I know much about them. I know that they are disarmingly easy to sow and to manufacture, and disarmingly difficult to find and disarm.

I know also that, of all weapons of war, land mines are the ones that do not observe the ceasefire, but continue to explode for generations afterward, killing and maiming

[Mr. Martin Bell]

the innocent. I know, in addition, that they are laid by soldiers against soldiers, but that their principal victims are nearly always civilians, and two categories of civilians—farmers and children.

It is a moral imperative that we cleanse the face of the earth of weapons that target children, and that we support the United Nations as the lead organisation that is trying to achieve that aim. The UN's new Secretary-General—I have spent much of the past three months with him—is active in this cause.

It is perhaps time to return to the politics and diplomacy of honour to help those whom we have it in our power to help. I see honour in that. I see honour also in trying to help those whom we have it in our power to help but only fail. As for not helping those whom we have it in our power to help, I see no honour in that. There is surely dishonour in walking away from those whom we are internationally obliged and mandated to help, as the United Nations faced in Srebrenica. Let that not happen again—not that or anything like it.

In the end, perhaps, it is a matter of drawing the distinction that was made a long time ago by Theodore Roosevelt: a distinction between those who are in the arena and are trying—sometimes succeeding, sometimes failing for daring too greatly—and others, the critics and the nay-sayers, whom Theodore Roosevelt described as "cold souls" who knew not victory or defeat. Let us not join the cold souls who know neither victory nor defeat.

6.58 pm

Mr. Derek Foster (Bishop Auckland): It is an enormous privilege for me to take up the remarks of two outstanding maiden speakers. I admired the hon. Member for Tatton (Mr. Bell) greatly as a journalist, but I thought that he was making a huge mistake when he stood at Tatton. I thought that he would not win. But then, I have been wrong about everything else in the election. The hon. Gentleman struck an enormous blow for democracy and for cleaning up government and this place. We look forward greatly to his future contributions.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bolton, West (Ms Kelly) spoke movingly and knowledgeably about her constituency. She will make a great contribution in this place. It is an enormous pleasure to see so many young and energetic women sweeping through the Corridors. They will make a change. That sort of change is, of course, long overdue. We look forward very much to my hon. Friend's future contributions.

The winds of change are blowing throughout the length and breadth of the country. They were blowing so very strongly that they blew me out of Government after only two days, and on to what is called the "freedom of the Back Benches" for the first time in 16 years, but I shall not go into that; it is not my ambition to rival the drama of yesterday's events. Those winds of change, some of which were unleashed by the tremendous victory of the Prime Minister, will make this into a great, reforming Parliament. There will be constitutional and democratic renewal, which is long overdue.

There are changes at work, however, that are even more fundamental than that—globalisation, the challenges and opportunities of the information society, and the fierce international competition in which we, with all other

countries, have to survive. One of the most exciting messages coming from my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister was that, not only as a party but as a people, we must embrace change.

Our country and, indeed, our party for far too long resisted change. We behaved like ostriches, putting our heads in the sand, and then complained that change had ridden roughshod over us and that we had no influence whatever in shaping it. My right hon. Friend has taught us that we must embrace change and allow the people to become partners in the management of that change, for the benefit of the many, not the few. Indeed, the most fundamental challenge facing the Government, and all Governments, will be the management of change.

My distinguished right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon) mentioned development agencies. I am glad to see that both the Deputy Prime Minister and the Minister at the Departments of the Environment, Transport and the Regions are present, because they campaigned fiercely and successfully for development agencies for many years. I and my colleagues in the northern group of Labour Members of Parliament have campaigned, too, for some 20 or 25 years, for development agencies, so it was a great pleasure to all of us to see it in the Queen's Speech. We owe my colleagues on the Front Bench a great debt of gratitude that they managed to get it into the Queen's Speech.

Why do we want development agencies? My right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne mentioned that they had worked so well in Scotland and Wales. Twenty-odd years ago, I was chairman of the North of England development council, and it was my job to try to win inward investment for my region, the northern region. I knew all too well the effectiveness of the Scottish and Welsh development agencies. I envied their effectiveness, their budget, their powers. I wanted that for my own region. Now we are on the threshold of getting it.

In the meantime, we have been extremely active in the northern region. We have the Northern Development Company, which has a tremendous track record in winning inward investment. I pay tribute to the chief executive, John Bridge, and the chairman, Sir George Russell, for the tremendous job that they have done. There we have an example of partnership at work.

It is a tripartite organisation, consisting of trade unions, business and local authorities. They have worked extremely successfully together for 10 years. If the Minister wants an example of how that can be achieved, he cannot do better than use the northern region as an example. We would volunteer ourselves for a pilot scheme if he has that in mind.

Not only do we have the opportunity to clean up this place, but we have the opportunity to clean up government and the quango state. I am glad that my right hon. Friends are embarking on that task. I should like the National Audit Office to have even greater powers. I want it to have the power to follow public money wherever it goes, even into the private sector, even following privatisations, even following contracts. Equally important, I want the National Audit Office to have the power to scrutinise all quangos. I want their number reduced. I want the appointment system put on a basis in which the public can have confidence.

I know that my right hon. Friends will not just sweep out all the Conservatives and put Labour people in their place. That would be unsustainable. As much as many of us on the Government Benches would love to see that, we have to exercise a restraining ordinance.

The public must be able to have confidence in the appointment system if we are to restore trust. The governance of quangos must be as rigorous as that of local government. They must hold more of their meetings in public. They must circulate more of their papers to the public and the press. The freedom of information Act, when it comes, must apply to quangos, as well as the National Audit Office powers to which I have referred.

My right hon. Friends in government have quite rightly moved quickly to strengthen the Executive. Government have been very bad at strategic thinking, and that has to be improved. Government—certainly the last Government—have been poor at strategic leadership. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister is rather good at that. He has exercised strategic leadership in the way in which he has changed—or we have changed—the Labour party, and he will exercise the same strategic leadership in changing the country. It is right that the machinery of Government should be strengthened for that strategic leadership to be possible.

It is right, too, that the Government should speak with one voice. One of the most impressive things—as I observed as Opposition Chief Whip—about the Thatcher regime was the cogent and pungent message that went out from every Minister, led by the Prime Minister, who had a tremendous flair for direct communication. I hated what she said, but no one was under any doubt about what she said. I want my Government to speak with the same pungency and cogency, but in strengthening the Executive, it is equally important to strengthen this place.

I say as kindly as I can to my colleagues that the House of Commons must not become the Prime Minister's poodle—bulldog perhaps, rottweiler occasionally, and it was nice in opposition to be a rottweiler snapping at the heels of the Government. But there may be times when my hon. Friends need to be rottweilers snapping at the heels of their own Government, because this place—if we care about democracy, and following the hon. Member for Tatton, I must say this—works only if we speak the truth fearlessly, whatever the consequences.

I did not hear the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) yesterday, but she spoke the truth, without any fear of the consequences. That will probably be one of the Chamber's most memorable occasions. The most memorable occasions in this place have been when former members of the Government have spoken fiercely to their own Government.

We must remember that too much power concentrated in too few hands equals the poll tax, and no Government ever want to go down that road. Despite this House and the other place, despite all the warnings of the Cabinet to the then Prime Minister and of the then Chancellor to the Prime Minister, that foolish tax was imposed upon the British people, and resulted, eventually, in that Prime Minister's downfall.

Therefore, I just say as gently as I can to my colleagues that we must move quickly to strengthen this place. A freedom of information Act really should have been in this Queen's Speech; I hope that it will be in the next one.

We must also move quickly not only to set up but to strengthen the Select Committees. The Select Committees have been by far the best innovation in my 18 years in this place. They were introduced by a Tory Government, and they are by far the best way to bring the Government to account and to scrutinise them. I should like to see Select Committees given even greater powers than they have now, with more staff at their disposal—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order. I am reluctant to interrupt the right hon. Gentleman, but we are debating an amendment on the subject of the economy and the Bank of England, and Select Committees are rather outside its scope.

Mr. Foster: I comply with your ruling, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Forgive me for ranging a little too widely. I am advised that, to be in order, I should speak about the Select Committee on the Treasury, one of the most powerful and effective Committees within our system.

However, I shall bring my remarks to a close by urging my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House to set up the Select Committees as quickly as is humanly possible and to give them more powers. Perhaps the Chairman of the Liaison Committee, when he or she is appointed, will revisit the Osmotherley rules. I should like those rules to be the possession of the House of Commons, not the Executive.

7.12 pm

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): In rising to make my maiden speech, I have the pleasure of paying tribute not just to one but to two simultaneous predecessors. The first, Sir Patrick McNair-Wilson, served briefly in the 1960s as a representative of Lewisham, West, but then became the Member of Parliament for the New Forest, which he represented with great diligence, efficiency, loyalty and faithfulness for nearly 30 years. His motto was, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." That is why the 900-year-old New Forest, a hunting forest, founded by William the Conqueror, retains so much of its marvellous authenticity today.

The second person to whom I have the pleasure of paying tribute is my hon. Friend the Member for Romsey (Mr. Colvin) who, until the general election, represented 81 per cent. of the electorate of the new New Forest, East constituency. I, as an adopted candidate, could not have asked for a better and more encouraging mentor. I am delighted to think that the constituents of Romsey will continue to have the benefit of his care and attention, as did those constituents whom I have been fortunate enough to inherit from him.

I am glad that the debate has widened somewhat into the European sphere because I wish to go a little more generously wide in my remarks than my right hon. and learned Friend the shadow Chancellor did when he said that the only commitment that had been given by the Government in the Gracious Speech was to enter the social chapter.

There was something else in the Gracious Speech to which we should pay tribute and it concerned the peace of Europe. Before I develop that theme, I want to show how the peace of Europe has affected almost every part of the constituency that I am now privileged to represent.

[Dr. Julian Lewis]

The new constituency runs from Totton at the edge of Southampton to Calshot at the southern end of Southampton water. Totton has a large employer, Millbrook Furnishings, which should be of interest to Members of this House and another place because it is the firm that upholsters and maintains the Benches on which we are all so happy to sit.

Calshot has more of a military history. Calshot was where R. J. Mitchell developed much of his work on the Spitfire and the seaplanes. Many attempts were made on the air speed record, some with fatal consequences to the pilots who were pushing the technology to its limits. Between those two extremes there are many historically significant defence locations.

Marchwood has the great military port from which the forces set sail for the Gulf. Hythe was the home of the British Powerboat Company that pioneered the development of high-speed launches and motor torpedo boats which were so vital a component of our coastal forces during the second world war. I am sure that many hon. Members will have visited Beaulieu with great pleasure. It is sometimes startling to think that it was at Beaulieu that the Special Operations Executive agents were trained before they parachuted, often to a fatal end, into Nazi-occupied France. To go from that beauty into that danger, as Violette Szabo GC did, never to return, required a degree of courage that it is hard to envisage in today's times of peace.

Moving along, we have, near Lymington, Green Marine, which has manufactured the vast majority of Royal National Lifeboat Institution lifeboats during the past eight years. The Cadland Consortium has developed the Cadland concept of a new ship to replace the royal yacht *Britannia*, not a floating gin-palace but a sail training vessel which, if it were adopted—I commend it to the Government—would supply sail training experience for scores of young people in between its royal purposes.

Moving north, we come to Lyndhurst where is to be found the grave of Alice Hargreaves, who was born Alice Liddell, and was the inspiration for Lewis Carroll's "Alice in Wonderland". Also in the parish church at Lyndhurst is a memorial tablet to two of her sons. One was a captain who won the DSO in the first world war, the other was a captain who won the MC in that same war. Both were killed in successive years on the Somme at the age of 33. So even Alice in Wonderland was touched by the tragedy of war in Europe.

Finally, at Fawley, which has the largest oil refinery in the country, there is a small church which unexpectedly among its plots has a small group of war graves from the Battle of Britain. Such sights are always moving, but I hope that the House will be as impressed as I was by the nobility of spirit of the parents of Flight Sergeant Burrow, who inscribed the following on his gravestone:

"Into the mosaic of victory we lay this priceless piece—our son".

Even an area as known for happiness, tourism and relaxation as the New Forest has had the scars of war deeply imprinted upon it.

In making my maiden speech, I am in something of a dilemma. I know that it may be the only opportunity in my entire parliamentary career to get my message across

uninterrupted. However, the reverse side of the bargain is that I have to be relatively non-controversial. That is why I should like to pay tribute to part of the Gracious Speech that my right hon. and learned Friend the shadow Chancellor overlooked—the section in which the Government intend to

"retain strong armed forces, including the nuclear deterrent."

There are many issues on which the Government will not accept that they were ever wrong or that the Conservatives were ever right, but I am sure that the nuclear deterrent is one issue on which they accept that we were right all along. In 1982, the then hon. Member for Edinburgh, Central, now the Foreign Secretary, stood at the podium at the Labour party conference and said:

"I come to this rostrum to beg Conference, to ask Conference, to plead with Conference to vote for unilateral nuclear disarmament."

I am happy to welcome the right hon. Gentleman and his Government back to the multilateralist camp.

Some may ask the purpose of worrying about the peace of Europe in the present context with no enemy on the horizon. In the 1980s, those of us who were fighting the battle for the nuclear deterrent often made comparisons with the 1930s and the arguments of peace through appeasement and disarmament versus those of peace through strength and deterrence. If the 1980s were parallel with the 1930s, I suggest that the 1990s are parallel with the 1920s.

In the 1920s, there was so little sign of an enemy on the horizon that each of the three armed services made its hypothetical plans against an entirely different country. Cuts in the armed forces were introduced through something called the 10-year no-war rule. The idea was that the Government would look ahead and ask themselves whether there was a danger of war in the following decade. If the answer was no, they would cut the forces. The following year, they would ask the question again, so they had a rolling 10-year rule. Yet when the danger arose, there was not sufficient warning to reverse those cuts.

That is why I strongly welcome the Government's decision—provided that they stick to it—to maintain strong armed forces, which are our insurance premium for peace in Europe. However, there is a danger that that new-found unanimity on the role of nuclear deterrence in keeping the peace could be undermined by the common defence policy that the European Union is threatening to foist on us.

Occasionally I have an open mind on European issues, and it certainly extended as far as visiting Brussels last September as the guest of a delegation of Members of the European Parliament. We were addressed by many representatives of different political parties from different member countries of the European Union. I was particularly struck by the following point, made by a German Member of the European Parliament: "What you really have to understand is that Europe is not mainly about economics; Europe is mainly about peace." I replied, "Excuse me, but if you mean that the EEC, the EC or the EU has played a key role in keeping the peace in Europe against Soviet aggression, that is clearly false, because the key role was played by NATO and the key component of NATO was the United States. Indeed, the lesson of the first world war, the second world war and the cold war was that, without American involvement, there is no security for peace in Europe. However, if what you

mean about Europe being mainly about peace is peace between Germany and her neighbours"—and of course, that is what he meant—"I still don't think that the EC, or the EU, has made a decisive contribution. What has made a decisive contribution has been the fact that Germany and her neighbours are all parliamentary democracies."

When I ask people to give me examples of dictatorships going to war with other dictatorships, they can give me many. When I ask them for examples of dictatorships going to war against democracies or democracies such as Britain in 1939 going to war against dictatorships, they can give me many, but when I ask for examples of democracies going to war against other democracies, they can usually come up with nothing or their examples are so obscure as to be virtually meaningless.

When I put that question to the German Member of the European Parliament, he thought for a while and he did not give me the usual example of India and Pakistan. Instead, he referred to a war between Prussia and Bavaria in 1866. I thought that if he had to go back to 1866, my case must be pretty strong. When I looked into the matter, I found that one of those states was not a democracy even on paper until two years after the war had finished.

In conclusion, the key to keeping peace in Europe is to preserve our system of democratic states and to retain democratic control over our armed forces. That is why it is meaningless for the Government to say that they support the maintenance of an independent deterrent unless they can be sure that control of that deterrent will remain in British hands and that our veto will be used against any attempt to incorporate it into a common defence policy. This is not alarmism, because the Committee on Foreign Affairs, Security and Defence Policies of the European Parliament has already said that a common defence policy would require a common deterrent, and that that would require Brussels having control of the British and French deterrents. So there we have it.

The Government have promised to maintain the deterrent, the armed forces and our allegiance to and involvement with NATO. They can count on the warmest, strongest and most full-hearted support from Conservative Members who are interested in defence if they fulfil those promises.

7.28 pm

Mr. Jimmy Hood (Clydesdale): I begin in the same way as my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton, West (Ms Kelly), with a few congratulations. Let me say how delighted I am to be addressing you as Mr. Deputy Speaker, and how pleased I am with your promotion to that high and honoured office. I hope that you will pass my best wishes to your family and to your constituents, who must be as proud that you are sitting in the Chair as I am to be addressing you tonight.

The hon. Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis) has just made an interesting speech on defence that was obviously well researched; he was well briefed. He spoke without notes, and I congratulate him on that. I was reminded of the last maiden speech about defence that I heard from a Conservative Member who spoke without notes. That was the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe). I am not making a comparison, but both speakers were obviously well briefed on defence. I welcome the hon. Member for New Forest, East to the House; I am sure that we shall hear plenty from him in the years ahead.

Let me congratulate two other speakers. My hon. Friend the Member for Bolton, West made an eloquent and passionate maiden speech. We are told that in a few weeks' time she might be celebrating another personal event, and we were particularly delighted to hear from her today. I also congratulate the hon. Member for Tatton (Mr. Bell), who, unfortunately, is not present now but who made an interesting speech about his experiences over the past few weeks and what brought him here. He told the House that he would be here for only one term; we shall wait and see whether his appetite is whetted a little further. I am sure that we shall hear many expert contributions from him, relating to his experience in his private field as well as his dedication to representing his constituents.

I feel that, in a way, I too am making a maiden speech, as this is the first speech that I have made from the Government Benches. It is almost 10 years since I made my maiden speech—also on the Gracious Speech, and also on the economy—on 8 July 1987.

In the previous Parliament, I chaired the Select Committee on European Legislation, which has long been undervalued, overlooked and not appreciated in the House. It does excellent work on behalf of the House, as I think the House began to recognise towards the end of the previous Parliament. I am sure that the new Government will improve the way in which we deal with European affairs in the House during the current term.

I do not wish to delay the House, but I should like to raise a couple of issues related to the Committee's work, and to earlier speeches. We have made inquiries into the intergovernmental conference, and produced three reports. We produced an excellent report on the role of national Parliaments, which is an important issue, not just for our Parliament but for every Parliament in every member state. I am sure that some of our recommendations will be discussed at the IGC. Even the previous Government accepted our recommendations on scrutiny and the four-week rule, and we hope that they will be incorporated in the treaty.

Let me appeal to new Members to take the opportunity to avail themselves of the information about European affairs that is available to them, certainly from the Select Committee on European Legislation. Our Committee produces reports regularly. It was the first Select Committee—and is currently the only one—to put its reports on to the Internet. Two Standing Committees scrutinise directives and legislation passed to them by the Select Committee, and any hon. Member who is interested in a subject that one of them is scrutinising can question a Minister, make a speech and represent the interests of his constituents in the Committee. That is a good opportunity to gain expertise on important issues that will be discussed not just in our Parliament, but in every Parliament in Europe over the next few years.

Let me say something about monetary union. I agree that it is highly unlikely that the United Kingdom will join a single currency if and when it is embarked on in a couple of years, because of the weaknesses in the convergence criteria. The new Government have always taken that view. Once, however, my name was included in a leaflet listing 50 Labour Members of Parliament who were opposed to the single currency. I was a bit annoyed at the time, because I had not approved my inclusion in that list, and—although I have my concerns about how

[Mr. Jimmy Hood]

and when we would enter a single currency—I am not opposed to the single currency *per se*. I put that on record now.

I feel that it is the political classes in this country that are discussing the single currency. The views of the public—our constituents—are shaped by soundbites that they read and hear in the media; there is no real debate in the country about the issues that are involved, and it is vital for such a debate to take place. Obviously, there will be more debate if we have a referendum, but I do not think that we should wait that long.

The tragedy is that, although the European Commission provided every member state with information about the issues involved in the single currency, and about the pros and cons, the previous Government, to their shame, refused to accept that information because they did not want a general debate. I urge the new Labour Government to initiate such a debate, and to allow the information to be provided throughout the country.

To those who say that we should not enter a single currency at any price, I say this. The question will not be, "Should we go into a single currency?" It may well be, "What will happen if we do not go into a single currency?" Many questions must be answered by those who are against the idea. Are we seriously saying that, if a single currency is established and is joined by the vast majority of European countries, the three major currencies in the global economy being the dollar, the yen and the euro, sterling will be able to survive outside those three currencies without our economy being seriously damaged?

The Liberal Democrat spokesman, the hon. Member for Gordon (Mr. Bruce), raised some of those issues today. He asked what the position was on the exchange rate mechanism, and what the value of sterling would be if we joined a single currency. If we did not do so, would the same happen as happened before? We all know the story, which was denied by the then Mrs. Thatcher when she was Prime Minister. When Mr. Lawson was Chancellor, he apparently shadowed the deutschmark without telling the Prime Minister. Would we shadow the euro and, if so, what would be the impact on our interest rates? Does anyone seriously suggest that the UK would have lower interest rates than the member states that were in a single currency?

People will have to do more than wrap themselves in the Union Jack to persuade me that not being in a single currency under such circumstances would be in our best interests. I raise those few points not only to provoke debate in the House, where we can always find reasons to debate the issue, but because I hope that sooner or later that debate will start in the country.

The speech by the right hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Sir J. Stanley) has prompted me to speak about the issue of qualified majority voting. It is a bit rich to be lectured by Conservative Members on that subject. I do not have to remind Conservatives who took us into the single market and set us on a road on which the single currency would be inevitable. I should not have to persuade or inform Conservative Members that Lady Thatcher conceded to more qualified majority voting than any Prime Minister since we have been in Europe. All the hot air about qualified majority voting should be treated as such.

I am delighted and proud, as are all my hon. Friends, to take part in a debate on the Gracious Speech of a new Labour Government. It is a great honour for us, who have been fighting for so long to be where we are today, but one has to be out in the country to feel the warmth and the relief of the people over a change of Government. It can almost be tasted in the air. I have been involved in many interesting votes in the House, but I cannot imagine an occasion that I shall enjoy more than last night's Division, which resulted in 422 votes for the Labour Government and 151 for the Conservative Opposition. That was a delightful moment for me, and I look forward to more such delightful moments.

7.42 pm

Mr. Jeffrey Donaldson (Lagan Valley): It is a privilege to have the opportunity to address the House, and I thank the people of Lagan Valley for electing me. My constituency has at its heart the River Lagan, which flows from its source on Slieve Croob through a lush and fertile valley to the sea at Belfast lough. Its main town is Lisburn, a friendly market town which is home to the Irish linen centre and Thiepval barracks, the headquarters of the Army in Northern Ireland. The borough of Lisburn is the second largest local authority in Northern Ireland and enjoys the reputation of being one of the most progressive areas in the Province. Lisburn is one of two cathedral towns in Lagan Valley, the other being Dromore, a traditional Ulster market town with strong connections to agriculture and textiles.

The historic village of Hillsborough has a long association with the royal family and has had many royal visits in recent years. My home village of Moira has gained the reputation of being one of the most colourful places in Northern Ireland and has won many awards for its floral displays. I could mention many other notable towns and villages in Lagan Valley, including Anahilt, Ballinderry, Dromara, Drumbo, Dunmurry, Glenavy, Maghaberry and the Maze. Suffice it to say that I count it a great honour to represent them all.

I pay a warm tribute to my predecessor, Sir James Molyneux, who served in the House for more than 25 years. Sir James was first elected to represent the Antrim, South constituency in 1970 and to represent the new constituency of Lagan Valley in 1983. As a Member of Parliament and leader of the Ulster Unionist party, Sir James was one of the most respected political figures in Northern Ireland and in the House. His solid and determined leadership through some of the most difficult periods in Northern Ireland's history has enhanced the cause of the Union, a cause that he dearly loved, and has contributed to the prospect of a better future for all the people of Northern Ireland. His advice, support and friendship have been invaluable to me, and I welcome the fact that we shall continue to benefit from his wise counsels in another place.

We welcome the Prime Minister's visit to Northern Ireland last week and trust that it is a sign of the new Government's priority in tackling our many problems; not the least of those is the need to reinvigorate the Northern Ireland economy. We continue to have one of the highest levels of long-term unemployment in the United Kingdom. Therefore, we welcome the Government's commitment in the Gracious Speech to deliver high and sustainable growth and employment by encouraging investment in growth, skills, infrastructure and new

technologies. We in Northern Ireland desperately need such investment, and although we have made much progress in attracting inward investment, much more needs to be done.

It is essential for such investment to be spread much more equitably than in the past. My constituency has not benefited as much as some others from inward investment in Northern Ireland. The neighbouring constituency of Belfast, West has enjoyed much higher investment, and I urge the Government to be more equitable in treating the various areas of Northern Ireland. I shall certainly put the case for more investment in constituencies such as mine.

There is also a need for better co-ordination of economic development agencies in Northern Ireland and for better co-operation between them and Northern Ireland's political representatives. For far too long, those agencies have gone about their business without involving political representatives in the way they should. It should be the Government's priority to give Northern Ireland Members a greater role in economic development in the Province.

Our largest indigenous industry is agriculture, and Lagan Valley contains many farmers and has a long tradition of farming. The industry has suffered greatly in recent years, most recently because of the bovine spongiform encephalopathy crisis, which has affected our beef industry. I urge the Government to give priority to the lifting of the ban on the export of Northern Ireland beef. It is widely accepted that Northern Ireland can meet the criteria that were laid down at the intergovernmental conference in Florence. It is unjust that the previous Government were not prepared to allow Northern Ireland to take the lead towards the lifting of the export ban. I hope that the new Government will end that injustice and will give Northern Ireland agriculture the confidence that it so badly needs by urging Europe to lift the export ban on Northern Ireland beef as soon as possible.

I was privileged to work for another illustrious Member of the House, the right hon. Enoch Powell, who represented the constituency of South Down, part of which is now included in my constituency. I pay tribute to Mr. Powell, to the manner in which he represented the people of Northern Ireland and to his contribution to the House during his time as a Member of Parliament.

One of my illustrious predecessors was Sir Richard Wallace, who bequeathed the famous Wallace art collection to the British nation. Sir Richard was Member of Parliament for Lisburn from 1873 to 1885, so it was appropriate that staff and pupils from the Wallace school in Lisburn were the first constituents to meet me in the precincts of the House. Wallace school's motto is "esperance", which means hope. That is what the House must offer the people of Northern Ireland—hope for a future free from the scourge of terrorism, where our people can enjoy full equality of citizenship within the United Kingdom.

Some people are cynical and say that great aspirations always come to a hopeless end. I rather like to think that great aspirations bring not a hopeless end but an endless hope. Hope is not just a nice option; it is essential to survival. It lifts our spirits and helps us to keep going. According to Solomon's ancient proverb, it tells us to

"Trust in the Lord with all our heart, to lean not to our own understanding."

It tells us to

"In all our ways acknowledge Him and He shall direct our paths".

When William Wilberforce addressed the House 207 years ago this month for three and a half hours with what the great orator Edmund Burke called the greatest speech that he had ever heard, he had an aspiration to see the practice of slavery banished from the British dominions. He faced incredible opposition and his aspirations seemed hopeless, yet Wilberforce was drawn by hope based on his Christian convictions and he campaigned on until the House passed the Slavery Abolition Bill 44 years later.

Northern Ireland, too, faces great problems. Its divisions have defied some of the greatest political minds in the world, but the problem is not hopeless. We, too, have a dream that peace may come and that all our citizens may learn to do justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with their God. We shall seek with all our heart and strength to bring about such a peace. I urge the Government to work towards that end in Northern Ireland—a fair and just peace, a real peace that recognises the rights of the people of Northern Ireland to determine their own political future, free from the threat of terrorist violence and political interference. That is the way to ensure that the hope for which the people of Northern Ireland yearn will not be snuffed out.

7.52 pm

Ms Judy Mallaber (Amber Valley): I congratulate the hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Mr. Donaldson) on his interesting and fluent speech about his constituency and Northern Ireland. We wish all the Northern Ireland Members well in their aspirations for the peace for which we are all looking.

First, may I publicly thank the voters of Amber Valley for electing me as their Member of Parliament? I feel honoured and humbled to have received the votes of nearly 30,000 people—55 per cent. of the local electorate—and, incidentally, against a Treasury Minister who was fighting on the failed policies that were put forward again this afternoon by the shadow Chancellor.

I enjoyed talking to a lady in Heage church last Sunday. She said, "I didn't vote for you; I'd never vote Labour, but isn't it exciting?" That is exactly my mood and that of the nation—it is exciting to be carrying out the change for which people have been yearning. It is exciting to be here discussing a Queen's Speech that implements our promises to the voters: our pledge to govern for the many, not the few; and our programme to build a dynamic economy with opportunity for all.

One of my first objectives is to put Amber Valley on the map. Most non-locals could not even guess where it is—braver people usually congratulate me on my beautiful Welsh constituency. Much of Amber Valley is beautiful, as those who have visited the National Tramway museum or who watch "Peak Practice", set in Crich, alias Cardale, will know. However, Amber Valley is in golden Derbyshire. If people want to remember that, they should imagine canvassing in one of my towns, Alfreton, and finding that they are building up further the massive majority of my hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Mr. Skinner), whose voters shop in our towns. He is a Derbyshire man through and through and he is my neighbour. I must put Amber Valley on the map.

I pledge not to follow the example of the former hon. Member for Basildon and mention my constituency in every sentence, but I am acutely aware of the problems of anonymity. Those were identified in an analysis by the

[Ms Judy Mallaber]

Amber Valley Partnership, which brings together local businesses, councils, the police and other agencies within Amber Valley. Our good communications in the heart of England are not sufficient to attract the businesses and tourists we should like. The outside world needs to know who and where we are. We are north of Derby, south of Chesterfield and we are a gateway to the Peak District national park. Our main towns are Ripley, Heanor and Alfreton, and there are a number of smaller towns and villages. Since the closure of the last pit at the end of the 1960s, the economy has developed a diverse industrial base, with headquarters of a number of famous organisations, such as Thorntons chocolates, Denby pottery, Bowmer and Kirkland, the Derbyshire building society and substantial textile and tourism industries. We need the encouragement to industry and help for our small firms, fairness at work, job opportunities and new skills that Labour's economic policies will bring.

A national minimum wage is a central part of our economic strategy if we are to move to a high-skill, competitive economy. Incidentally, it is an issue on which I campaigned for many years and it was one of the great divides between me and my predecessor. Phillip Oppenheim served the constituents of Amber Valley from the constituency's foundation in 1983 for 14 years. He freely admits that he was surprised to have been there for that length of time. He will be remembered in the House not just as an Employment, Trade and Industry, and then Treasury Minister but as captain of the parliamentary rugby XV and the owner of Vom, parliamentary dog of the year. Unfortunately, Vom scooped far more than his fair share of my local television coverage. People are warned never to compete for air time with children or animals and I certainly came second best to Vom.

One of the few issues on which I agreed with my predecessor was animal welfare. Our agreement was a source of relief to me during my election campaign, because it was the only subject on which I received an antagonistic postbag—it was from the pro-fox hunters. I hope that it is of some comfort to Phillip Oppenheim that the defeat of his party has almost certainly paved the way for the abolition of hunting. I think that he will feel pleased about that.

I also pay tribute to my predecessor's new-found talent as a newspaper diarist since the election. I have some dispute with him about his description of our meeting in the pub, but I have been fascinated by his insights in *The Sunday Times* into the difficulties faced by his party in recent months. I look forward enormously to the publication of his parliamentary novel. I understand that it is in the hands of the publisher of the former hon. Member for South Derbyshire so I can only assume that it is a political bonkbuster. As a new girl, I am not sure whether that counts as unparliamentary language. My predecessor has thus provided me with some entertainment, even if I have usually disagreed with him.

I am proud to be the first woman Labour Member of Parliament to represent my area and to be here with so many good women Members as part of a dramatic shift in the gender imbalance in public life. I hope that we shall have an impact on the welcome review of parliamentary procedure announced in the Queen's Speech.

I have a number of distinguished male Labour predecessors. The Amber Valley constituency was formed out of parts of the old Ilkeston and Belper constituencies. Ilkeston was well served for many decades by George Oliver and Ray Fletcher, who, in his retirement, was still campaigning in his wheelchair to save Heanor memorial hospital. I am sure that some hon. Members will remember him.

Like my hon. Friend the Member for South Derbyshire (Mr. Todd), I also lay claim to part of the seat held by one of Belper's most famous sons, George Brown. I do not intend to dwell on his more colourful side but will merely refer to his maiden speech, made during the debate on the Bill to nationalise the mines. He spoke of the problems with the private mining industry. That argument continues today after the closure of most of the pits.

As I look around my constituency, I sometimes feel as if someone is trying to scoop off the surface of Derbyshire and despoil its natural beauty. I was heartened by the commitment made in yesterday's Adjournment debate on opencast mining by my hon. Friend the Minister of State, Departments of the Environment, Transport and the Regions that he would review the current guidelines in line with our party's policy to ensure that the burden of proof was placed clearly on the contractors to show that opencasting was of clear benefit. I hope that the review will take place quickly, as Derbyshire county council has a number of outstanding applications for opencasting before it and there are more in the pipeline.

Some applications can be of benefit in restoring contaminated land, but I do not wish to do again as I did a few weeks ago and stand in a place like Stanley village in my constituency with a man in his 60s who showed me the unspoilt green views which he had looked at since his childhood but which are soon to be torn up for the sake of an amount of coal equivalent to what would have been extracted in just a few weeks from one of the old deep pits. Let us take more rational economic decisions than that in the future, because the decisions on mining have created such problems in my area.

We have a fine heritage on which to build. The men of Ripley at Butterley Engineering in Amber Valley built the steel structures for the wonderful St. Pancras station from which I travel to Derby. There is a virtually identical building in Bombay. It is a magnificent building. That firm is still going strong, but it desperately needs help with our European market and it needs a stable economy to secure its orders.

The traditional skills learned over many years in firms such as Butterley are no longer learned on the job in the same way. In South-East Derbyshire college we have one of the most extensive modern apprenticeship schemes in the country. The RightTrak scheme, sponsored by Amber Valley borough council and the training and enterprise council, provides opportunities for learning for many more people. The Government's emphasis, as reflected in the Queen's Speech, on using new and imaginative ways for reskilling throughout life must be the way forward. As an adviser to the Northern college in Barnsley, which has pioneered methods of attracting adult learners from deprived communities, I am delighted at the inspired choice of that college's principal, Bob Fryer, to chair the Secretary of State for Education and Employment's advisory group on encouraging access to lifelong learning.

The most inspiring part of the election campaign for me was the enthusiasm of some of the youngest members of our society. The toughest questioning sessions that I found were those held in our sixth forms, from an environmental forum with teenagers and, above all, in the junior schools which ran mock elections. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor may like to know that at least one of our junior schools had its own budget for each campaign team. He will like this—it consisted of 25 sheets of paper, because they went a bit mad with their posters on the copying machine.

If the Secretary of State for Education and Employment has any problems answering questions on how to cut class sizes, on why children should do more homework and on what is wrong with selection at 11, I can introduce him to primary school election candidates who can answer those questions for him fluently. Some of them were far more on message than most of us candidates.

If a school of five to 11-year-olds can discuss those questions and run an election campaign with only three spoilt ballot papers, we should never underestimate their potential; they are our future and our hope. We have a responsibility to put our policies, stated in this Queen's Speech, into practice. We cannot afford to let their enthusiasm fade as they turn into teenagers. We cannot afford to let their hopes die if they see that there is no work and no opportunity. We cannot be diverted by privatised utilities which cannot bear to see a dent in their fat profits. We must stick to our economic policies which are based on fairness, stability and equipping the country for the new millennium.

On 8 June in Amber Valley we will be commemorating the 180th anniversary of what has been called the last revolution in England when half-starved working folk from Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire marched to overthrow the Government. Unfortunately, the Pentrich rebellion ended in a rout after just 12 hours and its leaders were executed or transported. We have managed a peaceful change of Government by peaceful means, but the pace of change over our first 12 days, rather than 12 hours, has been exhilarating. I will be commemorating the Pentrich rebels by celebrating the change that we will bring to improve the lives of my constituents and others dramatically. Let us keep up that change, implement the Queen's Speech and prepare the next steps that will take us into the 21st century secure in the knowledge that we will not let down the younger generation.

8.6 pm

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot): Today's maiden speeches—not least that made by the hon. Member for Amber Valley (Ms Mallaber), who made an extremely interesting and amusing speech—have given us some interesting tours around the country. We all welcome the hon. Lady to the House, although we are sad to see not only Phillip Oppenheim but his dog depart. The hon. Lady paid a fair tribute to Phillip Oppenheim and referred to his great contribution to the House and on the rugged pitch, where I am glad that I did not encounter him or Vom.

We had a fine maiden speech from my hon. Friend the Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis). He was extremely assured and self-confident and was a great tribute to his constituents. His reference to the Government's acceptance of the nuclear deterrent owes

something in part to his personal commitment and crusade to bring about a public understanding of the need for an independent British nuclear deterrent, through his work for the Coalition for Peace through Security. I am sure that all hon. Members will have been impressed.

I want to add only one discordant note on the maiden speeches. In his maiden speech, the hon. Member for Tatton (Mr. Bell) was unfairly ungracious to his predecessor, Neil Hamilton. I am sure that many hon. Members on both sides of the House would agree that Neil Hamilton, as well as introducing a degree of colour and wit, made a significant contribution to the quality of our debates. He was *The Spectator* parliamentary wit of the year and it was unfortunate that that was not mentioned.

I agree with most hon. Members that the hon. Member for Tatton has made a contribution on our television screens and we look forward to his contribution here. I hope that he will follow professional journalistic principles, which he did not do during the campaign—I am sorry that he is not in his place to hear this. The hon. Gentleman should have examined the evidence as he was invited to do and awaited the report of the Downey committee. Having said that, I shall pass on, because we have enjoyed some other interesting speeches.

I am tempted to follow my right hon. Friend the Member for Devizes (Mr. Ancram) who, on his return as a retread, began his resumed career with the words, "As I was saying before I was interrupted". I am delighted to be back but my pleasure is tempered by the novel experience of occupying the unfamiliar Opposition Benches and by the loss of so many able men and women who contributed so much to making socialism in Britain unelectable.

The Tea Room atmosphere last week was as sombre as I imagine it must have been at those wartime bomber command bases as surviving crews surveyed the empty seats of those who failed to return from their missions. I shall not press the analogy too far because, while politics may be war by other means, unlike war, it does at least carry the prospect of reincarnation. I await with enthusiasm the reincarnation of some of my right hon. Friends, former giants of our party in the House, such as Michael Portillo, Michael Forsyth, Malcolm Rifkind, Ian Lang and a host of others who have made such an enormous contribution during the past 18 years to restoring this country's place in the world.

Although other parts of Britain may have decided to risk a five-year flirt with new Labour, I am delighted to say that Aldershot has remained true. I am immensely privileged to continue the constituency's record of Conservative representation, which has been unbroken since its creation in 1918. I am, moreover, only the fifth hon. Member to have the privilege of serving Aldershot since 1918.

As hon. Members may know, my immediate predecessor was Sir Julian Critchley, who served in the House for 27 years. It may not necessarily be a compliment, but he was described by Andrew Marr as

"one of the brightest Conservatives never to have achieved even the most minor office".

Sir Julian was renowned for his wit—which was sometimes more acid than was good for him—and provided some very welcome colour to the House. I shall

[*Mr. Gerald Howarth*]

be cautious in my remarks about him because, although he may have retired from the House, his pen shows no sign of running out of ink.

Sir Julian—whose distaste for Baroness Thatcher was as intense as is my admiration for her—and I are testimony that the Tory party is a broad church. For the past five years, he has borne an illness with characteristic courage and good humour, and I am sure that the House wishes him well.

I shall spare the House a Cook's tour of Aldershot. Since 1954, however, there have been only two other maiden speeches—all of which have been made by retreads—by Aldershot Members, and I should therefore like to remind the House of the contribution to our national life that has been made by the constituency's two principal towns: Aldershot and Farnborough.

In 1855, Aldershot was only a retired and scattered village of 900 souls. By 1860, however, the barren heathland between Aldershot and Farnborough had been transformed into a major military area, providing space for 20,000 troops to exercise. Today, signs on the A325 proclaim that Aldershot remains the home of the British Army—to the Parachute Regiment, which I know has a very special place in the heart of the Minister for the Armed Forces, and to the headquarters of 5 Airborne Brigade. Some hon. Members may remember that Aldershot was also the home of John Betjeman's beloved Joan Hunter Dunn.

"furnished and burnished by Aldershot sun".

Farnborough comprises the other part of the constituency. Its name is synonymous with aviation and is renowned around the world. Farnborough is the birthplace of British aviation, for it was from Laffan's plain that, on 16 October 1908, Samuel Cody became the first man to fly in the United Kingdom. Its splendid Royal Aircraft Establishment—which has now been rather unattractively renamed the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency—is renowned as a centre of excellence for research into aerodynamics and control, structures, power plants, radio, and in navigation, flight and weapon systems. The Department of Transport's air accidents investigation branch enjoys international acclaim for its work to promote air safety, particularly in dealing with terrorism. Farnborough also provides the headquarters for one of the world's leading companies, British Aerospace.

For most people, however, Farnborough is most famous as the venue for the Society of British Aerospace Companies airshow, which is the prestigious show window for Britain's most successful manufacturing industry. As the holder of a pilot's licence since I was 17, I am very proud to be the first pilot to represent Farnborough—the birthplace of British aviation—in the House.

It will be clear to the House that my constituency has strong connections with Her Majesty's services. The peace dividend has already incurred a cost to Aldershot, which is now the subject of a major regeneration—spearheaded by Rushmore borough council and English Partnerships—in which I hope that we can expect support from the Government, to ensure that the rundown and service reductions that have occurred as part of the peace dividend are made good.

It will come as no surprise that I shall be monitoring extremely carefully the Government's defence review, which was foreshadowed in the general election campaign and contained in the Gracious Speech. I shall also be asking for a reaffirmation of Aldershot's continuing military importance and of the commitment given by my right hon. Friend the Member for Henley (Mr. Heseltine), to ensure that, in the sale of Farnborough aerodrome, any new owner will have to guarantee a secure future for the airshow. I am pleased to note that the shadow spokesman, my right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young), turned around at that point in my speech. He was once the Secretary of State for Transport, and was only too familiar with the problems of sustaining the airshow.

In a defeat of the magnitude of that suffered by the Conservatives this month, it behoves Conservative Members to exercise some humility and to wish the new Administration well. They won the general election partly by claiming to adopt all those Conservative policies that they have opposed tooth and nail on the Floor of the House. "Keep the show, just change the cast" was the essence of that part of their message. Now that they are in government, however, they can no longer soothe the public with fine-sounding rhetoric, because they will have to take decisions. They are now, however, on unfamiliar territory, as was only too apparent during the general election campaign, when the Treasury's "black hole" was to be filled by selling National Air Traffic Services. That scheme was then said to be off, but then it was on again.

New Labour may have its adherents on the Treasury Bench, but—as we heard on Friday, in the maiden speech of the hon. Member for Hornchurch (Mr. Cryer)—red-blooded socialism is alive and well and sitting right behind Ministers. Labour's long march to embracing capitalism has only begun, and it will be sorely tested in office.

Mr. Skinner: And here.

Mr. Howarth: As the hon. Member for Bolsover (Mr. Skinner) rightly says, full-blooded socialism is alive and beating below the Gangway, too.

In the mid-1980s, Labour accused Conservatives of arrogance, but already some new Ministers have shown signs of a chilling arrogance. Despite today's presentation by the Chancellor on his proposals for the Bank of England, there is a general feeling among hon. Members that those proposals should have been presented first in the House and not announced in the immediate aftermath of the election. As my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) said, the Government have gained absolutely nothing by making that pronouncement before presenting it to the House. The major powers that are being handed to the Governor of the Bank should first have been announced in the House.

The Prime Minister has demonstrated a rather cavalier attitude in rearranging Question Time, which is one of the key mechanisms by which the House can hold the Executive to account. Even more ominous was the reaction of the Minister without Portfolio—who clearly is much dreaded among Labour Members—to a legal challenge to the windfall profits tax that may be mounted by British Telecom and BAA. Telling those companies to hand over the money, especially if the Government have

no lawful authority to demand them to do so, amounts to highway robbery, or to what Professor David Myddelton called the rule of the threat of law.

Such behaviour, and disgraceful warnings to Labour Back Benchers that they risk expulsion if they campaign against breaking up the United Kingdom, will fuel the public's fear that Labour cannot be trusted to act in a responsible fashion. It was marvellous to hear the speech of the right hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Mr. Foster)—whom I had not heard speak before, because, when I was previously an hon. Member, he was a Whip and had taken a Trappist vow of silence. He was absolutely right. Hon. Members must have the freedom to speak their minds. It is no good having a Minister without Portfolio telling Labour Members that they will be silenced and cannot speak their mind, because their duty when elected is to speak their mind.

Mr. Skinner: The hon. Gentleman was one of Thatcher's stooges.

Mr. Howarth: I was, indeed, one of the noble Lady's supporters, but I spoke my mind, as I will continue to do.

As today's report from Switzerland reminds us, the Government have inherited an unrivalled economic situation, in which Britain is performing better than our European partners. Primarily because—under the leadership of my right hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major)—we rejected the European social chapter, a golden inheritance means that the new Government will not be able to blame their predecessors for deterioration in the United Kingdom's economic position. They are now in charge and will have to take the decisions, and the Opposition will hold them to account for their stewardship.

8.18 pm

Miss Melanie Johnson (Welwyn Hatfield): I thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for this opportunity to make my maiden speech. I also thank the hon. Member for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth) for his comments on Aldershot and Farnborough—I know the area a little. I shall not, however, debate the more controversial comments in his speech. As a retread, he can risk making such comments, but, as a new Member, I do not think that I can risk doing the same.

Hon. Members will readily remember my predecessor in Welwyn Hatfield—David Evans. He was widely renowned for his plain speaking, and for the prominence that he gave to it. He often sought and quoted the advice of his wife Janice and it is sad in some ways, although not of course in others, that he is not still here for we could have had the benefit of his plain-spoken advice on the contenders for the leadership of the Opposition—a subject on which he certainly would have had firm views.

Mr. Evans could be personally very charming. I saw that for myself on election night when he congratulated me on my victory in Welwyn Hatfield and recorded how much he had enjoyed being a Member of Parliament—he will miss that. I am already obeying his injunction to enjoy being a Member of the House. I am a firm believer in diversity and my own style will be a little different from his. As a mother of three, I can assure the House that my children will help to keep my feet on the ground. Along with my constituents, my children will want to

know what I have been doing here and what benefits it will bring. I hope that I shall never have any difficulty accounting for my time here. They can all be critical and exacting commentators.

One of my earlier predecessors as Member of Parliament for Welwyn Hatfield was Helen Hayman, now Baroness Hayman, an Environment Minister. Baroness Hayman was very young when she became a Member of Parliament in 1974, 23 years before I did. Indeed, she is only a few years older than I am. As a young Member of Parliament with children, she will be remembered for her protest about the problems of breast feeding in the House of Commons. Women now have further problems of a day-to-day kind, notably the lack of toilets for them. I share the enthusiasm of my hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley (Ms Mallaber) for the fact that there are so many more women in the Chamber. In a way, we are lucky to have the problem of the lack of facilities available to us. It is right that there should be a better balance of women in the House. I was fortunate to have Helen's support and help throughout my campaign. She is still fondly remembered by many in the constituency for a particular virtue that I can only hope to emulate in time: great effectiveness as a local Member of Parliament.

Welwyn Hatfield has made at least two notable contributions to areas of our life as a nation. Welwyn Garden City recently celebrated, in 1995, its 75th anniversary. The garden city is a vision of how towns could and should be. As the second garden city, it was built with the needs of the people in mind—that they should be able to work and live close by, that their homes should be generous and good to live in, that there should be green spaces, shops and a strong sense of community.

The garden city concept still has a huge amount to recommend it. In Welwyn Garden City, that concept was impressively realised and the homes and environment that it provides are still much treasured. It provides a great example of what the effective implementation of a long-term plan can achieve in terms of enhancing the quality of life in following decades.

The other main town in the constituency is Hatfield, which was perhaps best known in historical times as one of the first watering holes north of London along the Great North road. Hatfield has links with the Salisbury family that go back many centuries. More recently, the Commission for the New Towns has had a hand in the development of the town.

Welwyn Hatfield has many successful businesses and many of the small and medium businesses on which the country's wealth will depend. It could also claim to be the pharmaceutical capital of the United Kingdom, with Roche, SmithKline Beecham, Schering Plough and Serono all situated in Welwyn Garden City itself. The pharmaceutical industry is a major contributor to our economy. My constituency is also home to the university of Hertfordshire, a place of learning where business and research are productively brought together.

Hatfield has played a crucial role in British aviation—home of de Havilland, the Hawker Siddeley and the 146, which was partly the subject of Helen Hayman's maiden speech. It was the place where the world's first jet airliner—the Comet—was designed and tested. I hope that it will be possible to keep the last flying Comet in the United Kingdom for the de Havilland museum—a matter currently in the hands of the Ministry of Defence.

[Miss Melanie Johnson]

At its peak, British Aerospace, as it became, employed about 10,000 people and many others worked in local allied businesses. In the late 1980s, jobs were lost and finally the works closed. It is a story with which many will be familiar. Aviation was Hatfield's business and the closure of British Aerospace was a cruel blow. It hit the local economy at the same time as the recession, which was exacerbated by Tory policies. The centre of Hatfield was badly hit and still suffers from the effects. Many of the workers took retirement and others moved to find work, often only to be made redundant again. Some took insecure and low-paid work, becoming part of Major's 11 million who have experienced at least one period of unemployment over the past five years.

As is always the case, in security and unemployment are scourges of family life: they uproot people, create poverty and chaos and shatter expectations. The problems particularly hurt young people who would otherwise have joined the works and become apprentices. Unemployment for 16 to 19-year-olds is now twice as high and nearly one quarter of unemployed people are under 25. One third of manufacturing jobs in Hertfordshire have gone over the past decade. Welwyn Hatfield's sometimes apparent prosperity hides great variations—the massive changes that it has undergone, the uncertainty, the insecurity and the lack of a sense of future under the last Government.

The people have made a decisive choice, which is why we now have a Labour Government. The sense of hope and opportunity, of change for the better, is almost tangible—a taxi driver said that it was like a breath of fresh air. As I talk to my constituents, I know that what they want us to build is an inclusive society in which people have a place.

The measures in the Queen's Speech are crucial. It is essential to give young people opportunities for work, training and education and to ensure that no one is without for too long. Young people gain much more than a job or a course; they gain a sense of belonging, of being part of something and of being able to contribute—of being a stakeholder. The measures will give young people security, dignity and optimism; they will use resources, not waste them, and we shall all reap the benefits.

We also need the stability that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor is working to establish; it will help my constituency a great deal. The British Aerospace site in Hatfield is still the key to its future and the future of business and investment in the area. A huge site now awaits development. The confidence and interest of business has been lacking over recent years. Long-termism, investment and stability will form the base on which Labour's partnership and dialogue with business will build prosperity in constituencies such as mine. Welwyn Hatfield has a high proportion of people with professional and managerial qualifications. It also has many people who need the opportunity to update their skills. Flexible welfare-to-work programmes, including training, will be very welcome.

In conclusion, let me say that Welwyn Hatfield has played a prominent part in a number of areas of national life; it has also suffered much over recent years. It has much to offer and is delighted now to have new hope for its future under a new Government. The people of Welwyn Hatfield have done me a great honour. As their

Member of Parliament, I intend to devote much of my energy to living up to the standards which, I am sure, they will expect of me.

8.28 pm

Mr. Damian Green (Ashford): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to join the throng of those making their maiden speeches this evening. I congratulate the hon. Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Miss Johnson) on jumping that particular hurdle shortly before me.

Unlike the makers of some of the previous maiden speeches, I am in the happy position of being able to pay a warm tribute to my predecessor with no ambiguity at all. For more than 20 years, Sir Keith Speed gave valuable and diligent service to the House, to the then Government when he was a Minister, and to the people of Ashford. He served with great distinction in the Conservative Government but, as some hon. Members will remember, he resigned on a point of principle relating to cuts in the Royal Navy. The Navy, in which he was proud to serve, was one of his great lifelong loves. It was a brave decision and one for which many in Ashford hold him in the highest regard.

Sir Keith has the advantage of having not only the respect and affection of the people of Ashford, but a physical monument in the shape of the Ashford International rail station—the first stop on the channel tunnel link after emerging from the tunnel. He fought long and hard to have the station placed not in the middle of nowhere but in the middle of the town of Ashford, and it now provides a springboard on which the future prosperity and growth of the town will be built. That one decision, largely the result of Sir Keith's tenacity, will provide a strong base for the area's future growth and I am sure that the whole House wishes him a long and happy retirement.

I should add that Ashford International station provides what may be one of the more vivid illustrations of a key economic fact in this debate. By catching a train there, one can be in Paris in two hours. Those considering siting their businesses in Ashford should know that one can put in most of a morning's work there and still get to Paris in time for lunch. Even in the era of the new puritanism, I hope that that will act as an attraction for some inward investors.

I shall break with tradition at this point by paying tribute to my predecessor's predecessor, now the noble Lord Deedes, who is a revered local resident. As I take my first faltering steps as Member of Parliament for Ashford, I am conscious of having not just one but two pairs of beady eyes watching my every move.

In many ways, Ashford is a suitable symbol for the two strands of this debate, because its economic health depends on its excellent links with Europe. Indeed, the importance of maintaining a consistent and friendly relationship with the other countries in the European Union is visibly expressed every week by a column entitled "Bonjour Europe" in our local paper, the *Kentish Express*. I am aware that some hon. Members, even on the Conservative Benches, might regard such a column as somewhat suspicious, but it expresses a reality—that jobs, prosperity and investment are all more likely when we are part of a large free trading area and when we run a free enterprise, low-interference economy.

From my constituency, I can produce not just a living example of that, but a living French example. Two weeks ago, Mr. Olivier Cadic moved his business from France to Ashford. His reasons, as quoted in the local paper, were that he moved

"his printed circuit board and computer software company from Paris to Ashford to escape crippling taxes and employment laws.

He believes the other EU countries will face economic disaster if"—

they—

"do not alter their taxation and employment laws in line with Britain's. If they do not their firms will want to move to Britain."

That is a lesson for us all: do not watch what they say, watch what they do. French businesses are moving to this country—not, in Mr. Cadic's case, because he is targeting the British market, but because it is easier for him to sell to France from Britain than to sell to France from France.

We all know about the big multinational companies that have moved to this country because they have found it such a congenial place for inward investment over the past 18 years. What is significant is that small business men with no immediate ambitions to become Europe-wide or global players are now moving to Britain because of the employment and taxation laws that have been established over the past 18 years. I would argue that that is more convincing than the various league tables and comparative economic statistics with which we can all have fun. The case that I have cited is that of a real business man taking a real decision and—most importantly—creating real jobs in this country, in Ashford rather than in Paris.

That is surely the heart of the economic debate that we as a country need to have. How can we best create more jobs? We all know that prosperity is not only a goal in itself, but that jobs are the best welfare policy that one can have. A party which poses as compassionate while organising the economy in a way that will make job creation more difficult will not only disappoint its supporters but let down the country.

In the spirit of non-controversy that one is expected to observe in a maiden speech, however, I will merely ask the Government to apply a simple test to each of the measures in the Chancellor's forthcoming Budget and ask, "Does this measure make it easier to create jobs?"

I ask the Government to apply that test to the minimum wage, about which we have heard a great deal in today's debate. If it means anything and is set at a realistic level, it will make it more difficult for unskilled people to find work and it will make it especially difficult for young people to find the first jobs which are vital to getting them into lifetime employment.

I ask the Government to apply that test to the windfall tax. However and to whomsoever it is applied, it is designed to take money away from companies. Some of that money might have gone on dividends, and a small proportion might even have gone to fat cats, but the vast bulk would have been spent on investment which would have created jobs. A windfall tax will make it more difficult to create jobs.

It is important for Conservative Members to recognise the mandate that the Government have been given, at least for those policies in their manifesto. However, I would argue that it is even more important for the Government to recognise that they have gained such an enviable economic inheritance that they should pause to consider what is going right in this country before rushing to change everything.

On Europe, it is clear that we should engage in constructive dialogue and preserve a full trading relationship, but it would be mad to say that being positive about Europe means being positive about the unemployment levels prevalent in too many continental countries and even madder to sign up to the very policies that have made their unemployment higher than ours.

I hope fervently that the new-found prosperity, both in my constituency and in the country as a whole, will not be put at risk. As a country we have huge potential, symbolised by the opportunities available to the people of Ashford. As a patriot, I hope that the new Government will not throw away those opportunities. This House and the British people will judge whether or not they do so.

8.37 pm

Mr. Paul Goggins (Wythenshawe and Sale, East): I am grateful and deeply proud to have this early opportunity to make my maiden speech in the House as Member of Parliament for Wythenshawe and Sale, East. I am full of admiration for all my hon. Friends who, having unseated their Conservative opponents, have none the less made generous remarks about their opponents' contributions as Conservative Members of Parliament. Like the hon. Member for Ashford (Mr. Green), whom I congratulate on making his maiden speech, I face no such challenge because my predecessor as Member of Parliament for Wythenshawe since 1964 was Alf Morris.

Before speaking of the quality of Alf Morris's political career, I first wish to note its quantity: he served his constituency and the House for a total of 33 years. Although I am 20 years older than the youngest Member of this Parliament, I was still at primary school when Alf Morris was first elected to Parliament. In October last year, *The Times* contrasted Alf Morris's

"Quiet altruism and dogged persistence"

with the

"Sharp young blades at the Labour Party Conference."

Members on both sides of the House would agree that Alf Morris is in every sense a gentle man, but he is also a considerable blade in his own right. In 1969, he won first place in the ballot for private Members' Bills and, famously, introduced the Chronically Sick and Disabled Persons Bill. The then Labour Secretary of State for Social Services is reported initially to have "hit the roof" when he heard about the Bill. However, the measure soon commanded all-party support and it received Royal Assent just days before the 1970 general election.

Later, Alf Morris became the first Minister for Disabled People. He has always been a tireless campaigner for disability rights and equality and, indeed, for all his constituents.

In Wythenshawe, Alf Morris is respected for his political contribution. Above all, people there love him as their friend and champion, and it is my privilege—indeed, my challenge—to seek to fill the void that he leaves.

Northenden and Baguley, two of the nine wards which make up the constituency, are recorded in the Domesday book of 1086, but the modern story of Wythenshawe began in 1926, when Manchester council took over the Tatton estate and started to make plans for the first municipal garden city in Great Britain. My hon. Friend the Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Miss Johnson) spoke eloquently of the vision which lay behind garden cities.

[Mr. Paul Goggins]

As the result of an ambitious pre-war and post-war house-building programme, the local population grew to 100,000 by 1964, when most households had members employed in local industry and in the public services. More recently, however, the area has suffered the effects of mass unemployment and it now has levels of social and economic deprivation equalling those of any inner-city area. Nevertheless, I know that the strong local pride, spirit and common sense will ensure the regeneration of Wythenshawe and the creation of a sustainable future for the local community.

The eastern part of Sale is also now part of my constituency. Indeed, I am the first ever Labour Member of Parliament to represent the people of Sale in the House. Sale has much to be proud of. It has a vibrant and improving town centre. It has access to the Metrolink tram system, which is revolutionising the public transport system in Greater Manchester. It also has a top-class rugby union team, which was narrowly beaten by Leicester in this year's cup final at Twickenham.

My constituency is also the location of the brightest hope of the north-west region—Manchester international airport, which was much in the news today. In 1929, Manchester was granted a licence to create the first municipal airport in Britain. In 1933, by the narrowest of margins—56 votes to 55—Manchester council voted to borrow £179,000 to finance the building of a runway and associated services at Ringway. Much has happened since. This year will be the start of a £172 million investment programme, which will include the construction of a second runway and lead to the creation of 50,000 new jobs in the local economy—including 15,000 on the site of the airport.

My primary goal as Member of Parliament for Wythenshawe and Sale, East will be to do all that I can—in partnership with the airport, other local businesses, the local authority, the training and enterprise council, schools and colleges—to ensure that as many of those new jobs as possible go to local people.

As for the runway protesters, suffice it to say that the legal and democratic process has been followed and the inevitable evictions have begun. In short, it is time for them to go home. As they leave, perhaps they will reflect with me on the airport's £17 million environmental package, which will ensure mitigation of the environmental impact of the second runway and will create, among other things, new hedgerows, ponds, woodlands and wildlife.

My constituency will benefit greatly from the economic policies outlined in the Gracious Speech. They are realistic, but capable of creating the real change that Britain needs. They will encourage a stable framework of low interest rates and low inflation while promoting long-term investment and sustainable growth. Most important they will bring practical benefits to my constituents, to the many thousands who have experienced redundancy and feel insecure in their present jobs, and to the thousands more who feel excluded from the workplace altogether.

The policies outlined in the Gracious Speech leave behind the hands-off deregulated free market dogma that has characterised economic policy for the past 18 years. That dogma is replaced by policies which link prosperity

with fairness, encouraging improvement in skills and education, to make the United Kingdom economy more competitive. They include a minimum wage guarantee to help the low-paid and a programme of training and job creation that will end long-term unemployment among the under-25s. Most important, Britain's economic future will be one in which everyone can contribute—our collective skills, imagination and energy combining to create a better future for all our families and communities.

Talking recently to people in my constituency, I have encountered two specific frustrations. First, there is undeniable evidence of a skills gap. There are skilled jobs to be done in the area, but too few people with the skills to do them. The second frustration is low aspirations among those without work. Young people, often in families in which there have been two or three generations without work, have given up looking, given up hoping. On both counts, we must wage a constant campaign to improve skills training and educational standards, and to encourage a sense of self-worth and confidence among those who have been excluded from the jobs market.

I welcome today's statement by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer, and especially his decision to strengthen the regulatory powers of the Securities and Investments Board. I congratulate him on his wisdom in appointing Howard Davies as the new chairman, as in addition to his undoubted financial skill and other experience he is, like me, a devoted supporter of Manchester City.

For the past eight years, before my election to the House, I have been the national director of Church Action on Poverty—an ecumenical charity working and campaigning alongside people in poverty. In that role, I have learnt much about the causes of poverty and inequality in Britain and their impact on the health, education, family life and social fabric of our country. Yet in all that time I have never heard anyone living in poverty argue that all their problems would be solved merely by increasing benefits. More money would help many of them, but what people in poverty want above all is recognition, dignity, respect and a chance to make a contribution—to be heard, to be taken seriously and to be included in.

The late John Smith spoke much about re-connecting our divided society. The Prime Minister argues passionately that progress and justice should stand together. I agree strongly with both of them. The general election result confirms that the British people also want a cohesive society and that they believe that Labour is the only party that can deliver it.

On the morning of Friday 2 May, my constituents woke up to a new era, a new hope and a realisation that things could be changed for the better. They want to be part of that process of change and the policies outlined in the Gracious Speech will provide the opportunity for them to do so.

8.48 pm

Mr. Phil Willis (Harrogate and Knaresborough): First, I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale, East (Mr. Goggins). I greatly enjoyed his speech and I share many of his aspirations. I certainly look forward to Ministers of his party keeping the promises that have been so carefully put together.

I am delighted to have been called to make my maiden speech in such an important debate. It has been a humbling experience today to listen to so many good

speakers. There have been many splendid speeches, particularly by Labour women Members—I know that my wife would have been pleased to be here tonight.

I am delighted to be the first Liberal Democrat to represent Harrogate since 1906. The voters of the new constituency of Harrogate and Knaresborough have put a great deal of trust in me; I trust that I shall not let them down.

It is the custom in maiden speeches to pay tribute to retiring Members of Parliament. My constituency has two of them. Robert Banks represented the former constituency of Harrogate for about 23 years. He brought great dignity to the job and displayed immense integrity. He was immensely loyal to his party, and he was charming and personable—if at times somewhat distant from the constituency. I am extremely grateful to him for sending me today a letter of congratulations on my election, wishing me well in the new Parliament.

For the past 16 months, however, there has been a second Member of Parliament for Harrogate and Knaresborough: Norman Lamont became the adopted or locum Member. He offered us the experience of his time as Chancellor, to the benefit of the constituency. I pay tribute to him for lending us his talents over these 16 months.

Another custom of maiden speeches is to quote the maiden speeches of predecessors. I could not find much in Robert Banks's maiden speech, but I was intrigued by the speech of the former Chancellor. It may interest hon. Members to hear some of it:

"Another convention governing a speech such as mine is that one should be as non-controversial as possible. I have to admit that for some years I have been strongly pro-European. I think it stems from being converted by a speech I heard in 1961 at Cambridge made by the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton, South-West (Mr. Powell). So persuasive was it that I have continued to believe in the idea ever since. As the policy of entry into the Common Market is officially the policy of both political parties, I hope that everyone will agree that by making an uncompromisingly European speech I am being as non-controversial as it is possible to be."—*[Official Report, 13 July 1972; Vol. 840, c. 1887-88.]*

Funny how the years change people in this House—perhaps it is something in the water. Or perhaps there is truth in the idea that there are creatures of the night that change people's views over time.

I have listened to other hon. Members extolling the virtues of their constituencies, many of which are extremely fine. I can understand why two people wanted to represent my constituency. God first created Yorkshire; then, at its heart, he placed Harrogate and Knaresborough. Knaresborough is a beautiful and ancient town with a great history. It had one of the great hunting forests of the middle ages. It has a beautiful castle and the magnificent River Nidd runs through it. It is, in short, a vibrant market town.

Knaresborough has two problems, however. The first is the town centre: the uniform business rate has annihilated the small shops there. I hope that the Chancellor will reform the UBR to make it easier for small businesses to establish themselves in our town centres. Knaresborough is no exception in that respect.

Earlier today, a Conservative Member extolled the virtues of low pay and said that a minimum wage would mean the end of jobs. I reject that view. A number of companies in Knaresborough sell products competitively right across the world. They do so not by paying slave

rates but by paying the highest wages to be found anywhere in the constituency. One of those firms buys chipboards from Japan and then re-exports them to Japan to be put in Japanese motor cars. It is an extremely competitive business and it pays very high wages.

Harrogate needs no introduction—its reputation precedes it. The splendour of its Victorian buildings, its parks and gardens, its 200 acres of stray surrounding and inside the town, its magnificent floral displays and its year-round attractions make it a must for visitors to Yorkshire.

Since 1926, Harrogate has been a spa town, and thousands of people have come to take the waters there. At one time, five crowned heads of Europe were taking the waters in the town. Generations of British aristocrats have visited it, too. Today, Harrogate is a different place. It has a vibrant economy and unemployment stands at 3.5 per cent. But it was devastated by the recession. It was a devastating blow when the Ministry of Defence pulled out and RAF logistics relocated to the former Prime Minister's constituency. It was also a terrible blow when ICI, National Power and many other large corporations pulled out, leaving thousands of unemployed people in their wake.

We have recovered, but let no one think that places such as my constituency do not need the same care and attention as other parts of the United Kingdom merit.

Today, crowned heads of Europe no longer come. Indeed, if they read the British press, they would feel themselves unwelcome. But hundreds of other people do come. They come not to take the waters but to sample one of Europe's finest conference and exhibition centres. I am fairly sure that there can be few Members present this evening who have not visited Harrogate for a conference or an exhibition. Last year, the Harrogate international centre, which is wholly owned by the borough council, brought more than £100 million into the local economy and underpinned some 7,500 jobs.

That brings me to the main issue to which I wish to draw attention. I listened carefully to the Gracious Speech, for proposals that might right the 18 years of Conservative attacks on local government. Sadly, there was little evidence, especially in terms of spending commitments and capital commitments. Much of local government has been devastated in that time.

Over the past 18 years, local government has been all but dismantled by neutering its ability to raise revenue and to invest in capital projects, be they infrastructure, inward investment or economic regeneration. Since 1979, local government capital spending has been cut more savagely than revenue or anything else in Parliament's history. Between 1979 and 1995, while prices went up by 145 per cent., local authority capped spend went up by 64 per cent. The net revenue rise over the same period was 183 per cent. and, in the past two years, basic credit approvals to local authorities declined by 40 per cent. Even if we include the iniquitous capital challenge, which I hope the new Government will get rid of, there has still been a cut of 30 per cent. in basic credit approvals to local authorities over the past two years.

Reduced capital spending is short-termism and leads to inefficiency and poor provision of services in local authorities. No private sector business could survive, given the previous Government's approach to accounting. As a party, we believe in investing in the nation's future

[Mr. Phil Willis]

and applying the golden rule, which is simply: we should borrow only to invest; we should not borrow to support revenue spending.

To invest in the future of my constituency, by the millennium, we must build a new exhibition hall. It is the biggest business that underpins our economy and we need that facility. We have planning permission—the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions granted it only last week. We have a revenue stream generated by a successful business to fund the £7 million required, but we cannot borrow and the private finance initiative does not work for us.

We have no objection in principle to private sector investment or to private sector operation if it is in the public interest, but there are many examples of where public investment and public operation are in the best interest of local communities, and that should not be denied on dogma.

The previous Government's obsession with the PFI has had a serious impact on local authority investment projects. Why is it right that the private sector, which would have to charge some 4 per cent. or 5 per cent. more in terms of interest rates, should be given jobs, when the public sector could do the work itself? Why should that cost be passed on to charge payers?

I should like to present some challenges to the new Government. Central Government must allow and promote increased capital investment in the whole of the public sector and in particular in local government, which has been harshly dealt with in recent years. A long-term view is essential. Local authorities should also have the ability to ensure that there is local accountability for investment and that that is not wholly reliant on Whitehall or Brussels. Priority must be given not only to obvious social and customer demands, but to investment that yields a financial return and that can ultimately reduce public spending. Local authorities must have some ability to make proper business investment decisions and to finance through borrowing where the additional revenue earned or cost savings more than match the cost of borrowing.

There are increasing opportunities for local authorities to attract external funds, often capital grants from central bodies or Europe, but there is often a requirement for matching funds and for relevant facilities to be publicly owned. That is right, but local authorities should be less reliant on external "lotteries" for grants and have the ability to access borrowing on a self-financing basis. Government policy should help local authorities to attract such grants. Surely it is a disgrace that, at the end of this century, we ask some of the poorest people in Britain to pay a lottery tax to repair, maintain and provide public facilities.

Where services in the public arena are better provided by the private sector, for example, the development of town centres or of other local authority buildings for commercial retail uses, improvements in current PFI rules to allow private sector-led development are required. I welcome the review that is in hand and, in particular, the Paymaster General's recent statement:

"Departments should not spend time and money trying to develop models for private finance where these will not work."

We have all wasted millions of hours on getting PFI projects together. Sadly, however, the Paymaster General also said that Departments should not expect any increase in their capital budgets. If that is the case, local authorities are lost. If they are not allowed to borrow, and if there is to be no change in the current rules, investment in capital projects in constituencies such as mine will simply stop. That is a major task, which I hope that Ministers will tackle.

Being the Member for the new Harrogate and Knaresborough constituency is a great honour. The previous Member was somewhat silent, but over the next five years I aim to draw to the attention of the House the needs of my constituents.

9.5 pm

Ms Helen Brinton (Peterborough): I am pleased to make my first speech in this important debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis), for whose constituency I have great affection, as I lived there for six years. Indeed, I joined the Labour party when I was in Harrogate and Knaresborough. I send my good wishes to the constituency, and I am sure that we shall hear more sterling speeches from the hon. Gentleman.

I am proud to be the first woman Labour Member of Parliament for Peterborough, although there have been some distinguished women candidates before, including Madam Speaker. The last Labour Member of Parliament for Peterborough was Mr. Michael Ward, who made his maiden speech in 1974 and referred to his failure to win the seat in 1966 by three votes. Conservative Members may consider that relevant to their present situation. On that occasion, he quoted an earlier distinguished Member, who said, "One is enough." I am sure that the House knows to whom I refer.

Within different boundaries, I have been fortunate to be returned with a very different result—a somewhat larger majority—7,223, to be precise, which I believe at least partly reflects the deeply felt desire in the whole country not just for change, in which case anything different would do, but for an urgently needed improvement in the quality of national life, which the Government will carry out.

However, anyone who values democracy in our land should be glad that individuals and groups not based in Westminster or even in London have not waited for our Government's election victory to take action to make their communities better places. I am proud to say that the people of Peterborough who have chosen me to represent them in Westminster are outstanding in that respect.

Of course, the people were ably represented by my immediate predecessor, who now represents the neighbouring constituency—the right hon. Member for North-West Cambridgeshire (Dr. Mawhinney), to whom I pay tribute for his part in many of the initiatives about which I shall speak. He has coped nobly with the most impossible black-spot job in politics—being chairman of the Conservative party.

Peterborough is one of only four cities in the United Kingdom to be chosen to be an environment city. It received that honour not because it has an inherently better environment than other cities, but because its people have worked together in partnership to make their city—and, in a small way, the world and the planet—a better place to live in.

We all know that during the 1970s and 1980s, evidence began to confirm that ozone depletion, global warming and pollution are threats to personal health and the stability and prosperity of developed and developing nations. In 1987, the concept of sustainable development was put forward. That means that we must meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

In 1992, the Rio earth summit of the world's Governments considered how to put that sensible concept into practice. The resulting plan, agenda 21, included a crucial point: the recognition that actions at central Government level cannot provide all the solutions, and that we must have action at a local level by local government, businesses and individuals. That view was echoed by the European Commission in its fifth action programme, which strongly encourages towns and cities throughout the Union, such as Peterborough, to respond to the Rio declaration. Those local responses are called local agenda 21s.

Peterborough quickly took up the challenge. In 1990, before the Rio summit, Peterborough city council produced an environmental charter and established several working groups. On the basis of those initiatives, our city was granted the status of environment city—to which I referred earlier—together with only three others: Leeds, Middlesbrough and Leicester. Peterborough's work on environmental issues has been reported as far away as Los Angeles.

In 1993, Peterborough environment city trust—or PECT—was established by the local council, the business sector, voluntary organisations, and interested and committed individuals. PECT has a board of management representing both large and crucial small businesses, local authorities and other public organisations, and local charitable trusts. It has seven specialist working groups, SWGs, which deal with issues such as transport, the natural environment, the built environment, education—which the Prime Minister has said will be his Government's passion—recycling and waste management, energy conservation, and business and the environment because we believe that they are linked. More than 150 organisations are represented through those working groups, so a wide range of community skills and interests are co-ordinated.

Peterborough environment city trust has already had many successes, to which I shall refer. First, the energy advice centre in Peterborough is one of only 31 in the nation. It has provided free and impartial advice to almost 8,000 householders and small businesses, and has reduced CO₂ emissions by almost 1 tonne per household, per annum. Peterborough energy advice centre has been independently judged to be the United Kingdom's most cost-efficient and environmentally effective energy advice centre. However, it requires a secure funding future—with whatever balance of private and public money is deemed appropriate—if it is to continue to operate beyond the end of June this year. I shall fight for that cause.

Secondly, the "eco house"—the Peterborough environment centre and energy show home—was opened by His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales in 1996. The facility is used by schools, local business groups and public organisations, and is a focus for voluntary environmental work and concern.

Thirdly, the £11.5 million Green Wheel millennium project consists of a network of pedestrian walks and cycleways encircling the city. It will be landscaped, providing a green setting for our city, and will physically link many of the city's main tourist facilities, creating important new business opportunities. It will include three new heritage centres and areas that will function as permanent outdoor classrooms.

Fourthly, the material reclamation facility—which my colleagues tell me is called an MRF—is an immense achievement. Its £2.5 million cost is shared by the Department of the Environment, Peterborough city council and Shanks and McEwan, and it is situated on land provided under the Commission for the New Towns' Invest in Success scheme. By September this year, 55,000 households in Peterborough will have a refuse collection system using separate green boxes for paper, plastics and cans. Local businesses will also be able to use the facilities, and jobs will be created. By 2000, we shall provide a service for the adjoining counties of Lincolnshire, Norfolk and Cambridgeshire. The facility will open in late June or early July, and I am delighted to announce that I hope to persuade my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister—if time and his commitments allow—to come to Peterborough and preside at that opening.

Next month, there is to be a business forum on the environment, at which an agenda for green business is to be discussed and set out. I have been invited to speak.

I am glad to have had the opportunity to pay tribute to the outstanding achievements of PECT and other groups and of individuals in the constituency, in an important area. I look forward to being able to use my new role in this Parliament to further that work in a spirit of partnership and optimism, on which tide of feeling the Government have been brought to power.

9.15 pm

Sir George Young (North-West Hampshire): Let me make it clear at the outset of this Front-Bench contribution that my speech is not a veiled bid for the leadership of the Conservative party. I make my speech in the absence of Tony Newton, who was a good House of Commons man who held a series of the most difficult jobs in Government. Tony introduced a number of welcome reforms to our proceedings. I think that he will be genuinely missed by his many friends on both sides of the House.

I am sad personally to lose my two hard-working junior Ministers, John Bowis and John Watts. I suppose that it is a small compensation that they are not in the House to make informed criticism of my management style.

We have heard many outstanding maiden speeches during the debate. The hon. Member for Bolton, West (Ms Kelly) paid a gracious tribute to Tom Sackville. She spoke movingly about youth unemployment and the minimum wage in her constituency. We wish her well in her quest for university status for her college. I think that the House will be more cautious about her aspirations for Bolton Wanderers. The hon. Lady can have a new university without the rest of us suffering, but her football team can flourish only at our expense.

I compliment the hon. Member for Tatton (Mr. Bell), who was confronted with an unusually difficult task in paying tribute to his predecessor. I think that he managed

[Sir George Young]

it with the right balance of tact and sincerity. He then went on to speak with insight and with feeling about land mines and the role of the United Nations. The hon. Gentleman made it clear that he was in this place for only one Parliament. It may be that others who made their maiden speeches will be here for only one Parliament, but they did not make such a ringing declaration at the beginning of their contributions.

My hon. Friend the Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis) spoke without notes and in a rather ingenious way linked the theme of peace in Europe with a number of cities, towns and villages in his constituency. I compliment the hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Mr. Donaldson) on his maiden speech, in which he paid a warm tribute to Jim Molyneux. The hon. Gentleman made a plea for the Government to make Northern Ireland a special case and allow the lifting of the export ban.

I compliment the hon. Member for Amber Valley (Ms Mallaber) and congratulate her on her maiden speech. It is clear that she will not replace Phillip Oppenheim as captain of the rugger XV of the House of Commons. The hon. Lady made a moving speech about opencast mining in her constituency. It was good to hear that at least one new Member will take a particular interest in parliamentary procedure.

I compliment also the hon. Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Miss Johnson). She clearly has a forgiving nature, given what David Evans is alleged to have said about her. I think that the House recognises the generosity of her tribute. David Evans could certainly cause us on the Conservative Benches quite some grief.

I was pleased especially to see my hon. Friend the Member for Ashford (Mr. Green) in the Chamber. He is a former constituent of mine with whom I worked well in government. My hon. Friend paid a glowing tribute to Keith Speed. The new Ashford International station, whose formal opening I attended, is indeed a good monument to Sir Keith. I am sure that by the time my hon. Friend has finished in Kent there will be similar monuments littering the countryside in tribute to his hard work. My hon. Friend paid also a compliment to Bill Deedes, who still writes a fairly useful column in a much-read newspaper. That was a useful precaution on my hon. Friend's part.

The hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale, East (Mr. Goggins) represents a constituency that was one of the more optimistic destinations to which the Conservative party chairman sent me during the general election campaign. If the hon. Gentleman does as well as Alf Morris did in representing his constituents, he will have done very well indeed. I hope that I played a small part in promoting more jobs in his constituency by giving the go-ahead for the second runway at Manchester airport earlier this year. I very much hope that the protesters take on board the robust message that he gave them in his speech: it is time to go home. If they do go home, I hope that they do so above ground rather than below it.

The hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis) is obviously proud of his constituency. He has a tradition of good service in local government. Again, the House will appreciate what he said about Robert Banks.

I commend the hon. Member for Peterborough (Ms Brinton), who had a very long wait for her maiden speech and made some charitable comments about the chairman of the Conservative party. Again, she has a deep pride in her constituency.

In addition to the many maiden speeches, we had a resignation speech, from the right hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Mr. Foster), who must have created some record as being a ministerial office holder for the shortest time in the history of the Government. He made an interesting speech. He was Chief Whip of the Labour party only two months ago—[HON. MEMBERS: "Two years!"] He obviously made a deep impact.

When the right hon. Gentleman was Chief Whip, he gave a clear incitement to new Labour Members to rebel. I suggest that the new Chief Whip has some quiet words, on Whips' terms, with his predecessor. The right hon. Gentleman also warned the Prime Minister not to treat the House of Commons as his poodle. Those were wise words, if I may say so.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Sir J. Stanley) made a speech that is required reading for those who do not fully understand the consequences of signing up to the social chapter.

It was also good to see again my former parliamentary private secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth), who paid a glowing tribute to Sir Julian Critchley.

Perhaps I will be allowed to make a small maiden speech myself, as this is the first time that I speak as the Member for North-West Hampshire. The boundary commission effectively abolished my former constituency of Ealing, Acton by dividing it into three and then attaching each part to a neighbouring constituency. I was very cross at the time, but by 2 May, with a majority of 11,500 in North-West Hampshire, the anger had subsided.

I pay tribute to my popular predecessor, Sir David Mitchell, who represented the area for some 30 years and will be a hard act to follow. He helped to convert me from an urban Member of 23 years to a rural one of nearly 23 days. A large part of that scenic constituency is owned by the 7th Earl of Carnarvon, and another large part by the 1st Baron Lloyd-Webber, who, Labour Members will be pleased to know, is still in residence. Both are good landowners and they mark the blend of the old and the new that is north-west Hampshire, where unemployment is, mercifully, lower than anywhere else in the country and still falling.

A number of hon. Members referred to the issue of the procedures of the House. I genuinely believe that the Government made an unnecessary error of judgment about the arrangements for Prime Minister's questions that betrays a dangerous streak of authoritarianism. One reason why the Jopling reforms took root is that they were extensively discussed and agreed first. The ground was cleared before the shrub was planted. There was no reason for the Government to rush ahead with the new arrangements for Prime Minister's questions, and the Prime Minister would gain much credit from the House if he conceded that he acted precipitately and reverted to the original arrangements while the House quickly reflected on the proposed changes.

Nor did we find out from the Chancellor exactly why he made his announcement about the Bank of England when he did instead of waiting some 14 days, with the

statement then being subjected to the normal parliamentary scrutiny that we would expect for a statement of such magnitude.

There is, of course, a risk that any speech from the Opposition Benches will sound like the Black Fairy in "Sleeping Beauty", making tactless and unpopular predictions in the middle of a rather good party. I shall try to avoid that, but I want to put some questions to the Deputy Prime Minister and then outline some strategic issues that I believe confront the new Administration.

The Deputy Prime Minister has responsibility for transport. He is now well qualified, as he seemed to spend the whole of the election campaign cocooned in a bus from which he was allowed out from time to time for short natural breaks of oratory. One of the most breathtaking moments of impudence during the campaign was when the now Prime Minister annexed a privatised train operator for a photo opportunity.

No one is more in favour of people travelling by train than I am. In fact, Conservative policies helped to reverse decades of decline in travel by rail. But no group of individuals fought harder to prevent Richard Branson from having an opportunity to run that train than the parliamentary Labour party. Given all its predictions of the injury that the private sector would do to the railways, the country was slightly surprised to see Labour Members enjoying Mr. Branson's hospitality at Euston station.

The Deputy Prime Minister can do two things to atone for that behaviour. First, he can admit that he was wrong to deny Branson and others the opportunity to invest in and improve our railways. Secondly, he can confirm that he personally will oppose any windfall tax on Railtrack that will put back the improvements on the west coast main line, the upgrading of our mainline stations and the building of Thameslink 2000—all improvements that we want to see.

Will the Deputy Prime Minister also tell the House whether the windfall tax will fall on the privatised bus companies? It is common ground that we all want to promote travel by bus. The companies are now investing substantially in new buses, improved ticketing, better information and quality partnerships with local authorities. A windfall tax would be paid for either by higher fares or by less investment, in conflict with any sensible balanced transport policy.

Let me say a word about the logic of the windfall tax itself, which looks as if it contains more wind than fall. Labour Members seem to think that one can extract billions of pounds from companies without there being any adverse consequence. The fact that the share price may discount the tax does not alter the impact of the tax on resources. The money extracted from the companies will be made good by higher prices, reduced services, less investment or reduced dividends—reduced dividends not to the original shareholders, but to the current holders who are largely institutional investors paying today's pensioners.

I suspect that the money will come from reduced investment, in which case, jobs will be lost in one sector of the economy—core permanent jobs, modernising and improving our infrastructure—to create temporary and more marginal jobs in another sector. It is by no means clear to me that that interventionist and rather arbitrary switch of resources will leave us all better off.

At some point, the Deputy Prime Minister should tell us his plans for London Transport. The Labour party made it clear that the Conservative Government's provision for London Transport was inadequate. On 8 January, in a Labour party press release, the now Minister for Employment and Disability Rights, the right hon. Member for Oxford, East (Mr. Smith), said:

"It is clear that LT no longer has the resources to undertake even the most routine of maintenance work."

We had clear proposals to put LT in the private sector, to reinvest the proceeds and to cap the fares. Clearly, we cannot do that. But what will the Labour party do? If Labour Members are proud to ride on privatised trains above the ground, why not below the ground? If old Labour councils can voluntarily privatise their bus companies and airports—and they have—why cannot a new Labour Government privatise the underground?

Introducing the debate on Wednesday, the Prime Minister said that his Government's job was to modernise "by the best means available irrespective of dogma or doctrine".—*Official Report*, 14 May 1997; Vol. 294, c. 61.]

The truth is that the Deputy Prime Minister does not accept that. Not all the dogma has been flushed out of his system. It is no good trotting out waffle about private finance. The chairman of London Transport made it clear that that would not do the trick. If the right hon. Gentleman rejects our option, he owes it to Londoners to come up with another one that is at least as good, or the words of his fellow Ministers will simply be hollow rhetoric.

On local government, another area for which the right hon. Gentleman has responsibility, the Government propose to permit the phased release of capital receipts. It is worth just reminding the House that, had we heeded the Labour party's advice, there would be no capital receipts to talk about, because the Labour party opposed the policy that generated them. Will the right hon. Gentleman tell us by how much that increases the PSBR—which the Chancellor wishes to reduce? When the receipts accrued, they were set aside and the PSBR fell. If they are spent, it goes up. What does the right hon. Gentleman propose to do about the fact that the receipts tend to be in the wrong places and the authorities with the greatest need are not those with the highest receipts? Our policy, which he proposes to jettison, had the merits of targeting the funds on areas of greatest need. What will he do about authorities that used the proceeds to reduce debt and do not have the cash? Will they be penalised for their prudence?

One of the few moments during the campaign that the Labour party might prefer to forget involved the privatisation of National Air Traffic Services. If I had been told before the election campaign that an obscure part of the Civil Aviation Authority would dominate the campaign for two days, I would not have believed it. However, we will all remember the pictures of the right hon. Member for Oxford, East speaking without restraint at the last party conference, describing what fate awaited anyone who tried to privatise NATS. It then transpired that it was exactly what Labour would consider if elected. Can the Deputy Prime Minister now confirm that his Department will proceed with enthusiasm to privatise NATS, as we planned, so that the sums begin to balance? If not, which part of his Department's programme will be cut?

[Sir George Young]

I turn finally to some of the strategic issues that confront the new Administration. The Chancellor has appointed Martin Taylor to bring together the tax and benefit systems. I personally support any reform that simplifies and rationalises the financial interface between the individual and the state. However, the Chancellor will need to surmount two hurdles. First, we now have independent taxation of husband and wife—a reform which we introduced which gives fiscal independence to women and which the Chancellor would be ill advised to reverse. The social security system, however, aggregates the resources of husbands and wives, or indeed of partners, for wholly understandable reasons. Measures to knock the two systems together will somehow have to overcome that diversity of structure.

The second issue is as follows. Either the two systems can be put together on a nil cost basis so that the benefits are paid by a number of losers—that would be prudent, but unpopular—or there can be a safety net, in which case there is quite a big hit on public expenditure, which the Chancellor is trying to control. I wish the right hon. Gentleman well. The House will be interested to learn how he proposes to clear those two hurdles.

On a more critical note, to get elected, Labour Members had to match our commitments on public expenditure, but to remain in office, I believe that they will be unable to keep them. They will be unable to reconcile the constraints of Conservative public expenditure targets with the political imperatives that rule the Labour party. There is not enough petrol in the tank to drive the Deputy Prime Minister's Jaguar as far and as fast as he wants. I do not think that Labour Members joined their party to spend no more on public services than the Conservatives did, but when they break the clear undertakings they have given on public expenditure, they will begin to lose public confidence, not least because they have insisted on being judged on keeping their word.

Let me give an example. This year's local government settlement was a tough one. Many new Labour Members come from local government, and I doubt whether they would dissent from that assertion. Indeed, I expect that they complained bitterly about it at the time, but bit the bullet in response to some gentle coaxing from the right hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson) and some murmured words about not rocking the boat.

Next year's figure for aggregate external finance for local government in London, to which the Labour party is committed, is £35.96 billion—an increase of 0.53 per cent. over this year's figure. I am confident that, had we won, we could have delivered such a settlement. But will Labour Members vote in the Lobbies for central Government support that is as tough as our settlement in January? How will that go down with the public sector trade unions, whose settlements have been restrained in recent years, but whose ambitions have not? Did the unions support Labour's election campaign, to be rewarded with the same settlement that the Conservatives gave them?

How will such a settlement go down with Labour Members' colleagues who are running local government services, who genuinely believed that a Labour Government would mark the end of the period of restraint? What will their supporters in the constituencies

make of it when the alibi of a Conservative Government is no longer there to blame? How will Labour Members react, torn between the iron discipline imposed by men in goggles and hard hats in the Whips Office to conform and the pressures from their local parties to rebel? Similar dilemmas will confront Labour Members with teachers and nurses when the consequences of agreeing to our expenditure totals in other areas dawn on them.

After a major defeat, it is wholly understandable that there is some turbulence in my party; but no one should be lulled into thinking that there are no tensions, no instability and no conflict in the Labour party. Indeed, the Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister personify those tensions, that conflict and that instability. It is a party that is embarrassed about its past, and equivocal about its future. It clearly had a successful strategy for winning an election, but it is not clear that it has a successful strategy for running the country.

Finally, I come to a paradox that has featured throughout our five-day debate. Labour Members have criticised our record on health and education, but their Government have accepted our financial framework for the next two years without demur. They have criticised a polarised society, but have abandoned their proposals to redistribute wealth. They have criticised privatisations, both past and proposed, but they will not buy back so much as a British Rail sandwich, and they are considering privatising air traffic control. They have, in effect, criticised the foundations that we have laid over the past 18 years, but they are now perfectly happy to build on those foundations.

Along with my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke), I speak as one of the few Conservative Members who were Ministers both when we started in 1979 and when we finished in 1997. No one could seriously deny that we have left the country in far better condition than when we inherited it. Labour Members' assertions during the debate of poor financial management, wrong priorities, under-resourcing of public services and social incohesion are wholly undermined by their decisions to leave so much intact.

In partnership with the British people, we achieved much of which we can be proud, but people now want something different. We will encourage the Government to build on our achievements; but we will oppose those of their proposals that will damage our country with all the vigour that we can command.

9.37 pm

The Deputy Prime Minister and Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. John Prescott): The debate has been almost a maiden speech on the Queen's Speech. We have heard 10 excellent maiden speeches, which have reflected the local knowledge and varied experiences of hon. Members—quite a few of them women—who will begin to change the House considerably in many ways. I must advise them, however, that the relief that they may now feel after making their maiden speeches is no guarantee that they will not feel the same tensions as they approach their second speech.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bolton, West (Ms Kelly) is a doughty fighter, who will ensure that the views of her constituency are properly reflected here. As has been mentioned, I visited the constituency on the

Prescott Express during the election campaign. Indeed, I am proud to claim that every constituency that I visited—there were more than 100—went Labour. Next time, I shall take two Prescott buses to ensure that we secure a bigger majority. My hon. Friend brings with her experience of the Bank of England, which will certainly play a part in debates in the House.

The House will have listened attentively to the hon. Member for Tatton (Mr. Bell), who made a controversial speech but undoubtedly conveyed a powerful message—as, indeed, did his election. I am sorry that he is not present: perhaps the first lesson that he should learn is that, after making a speech, an hon. Member should listen to the responses. Perhaps that, too, is controversial, but the point needs to be made. Nevertheless, the hon. Gentleman's election was an historic decision, and he was the first hon. Member whom I have heard announce his resignation at the next general election.

The hon. Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis) gave us a colourful view of life in his constituency. He reminded us that the upholstering of the Benches in the Chamber was done by a company in that constituency. He spoke from what we know as the rebellion Bench from below the Gangway. No doubt, he will contribute to the many discussions within the Opposition, especially on Europe.

The speech by the hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Mr. Donaldson) reminded us of the beautiful parts of Northern Ireland, and we listened carefully to his comments about the troubles in the Province. I am sure that all hon. Members share his desire to see a just peace free from terrorist violence in Northern Ireland. We shall debate that in the months ahead.

My hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley (Ms Mallaber)—who represents one of the constituencies that I visited—spoke with knowledge and with more than a hint of humour, which is always useful in our debates. No doubt, she will do as she said and put her constituency on the map.

I remember with pleasure my visit to the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Miss Johnson). She will represent the area in a way that the previous Member did not. She has three wonderful children and is clearly a different voice for that area, whose constituents will be represented with charm and commitment. She will certainly make her mark in our debates and I sincerely hope that she will represent the constituency for a long time.

The hon. Member for Ashford (Mr. Green) reminded us of the more positive effect of European discussions and their consequences for our economy. The hon. Member whom he replaces argued well about European developments and about Ashford station, about which the hon. Gentleman also spoke. I welcome his statement that, as a confirmed patriot, he thinks that there is something to be gained from Europe. No doubt, we shall hear more from him in future debates on that subject.

In his maiden speech, my hon. Friend the Member for Wythenshawe and Sale, East (Mr. Goggins) reminded us of the previous right hon. Member for Manchester, Wythenshawe, Alf Morris. That voice for Manchester has been replaced by another authoritative voice and my hon. Friend will clearly play his part in the debate that was always at the heart of discussions with Alf Morris. My hon. Friend reminded us of the controversy over

Manchester airport. The rightful pride of his constituents in that airport is being undermined by Swampy's brigade, and we hope that a settlement can soon be achieved there.

The hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis) made a detailed contribution, especially in the context of the private finance initiative proposals, based on his local authority experience. Obviously, those proposals will be the subject of considerable debate. He was certainly informed about the matter, and the House will be the better for his detailed knowledge. Our only common feature is that we both defeated Mr. Norman Lamont, I at the beginning of his career and the hon. Gentleman at the end of it.

My hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough (Ms Brinton) clearly showed her vigorous approach to matters about which she feels strongly, especially in relation to the environment, which will play an important part in our future debates. I am reminded that her majority was about 7,000 although, in the past, majorities in Peterborough were small and subject to many recounts. The House congratulates all hon. Members on their speeches and wishes them well in future debates.

I thank all those who have contributed to the debate on the Gracious Speech. It marks the start of a Labour Government who were given unprecedented support by the British people. It has been an important debate and the Queen's Speech heralds a fresh beginning for the economy and the British people. It marks a new direction and is the start towards fulfilling the contract into which we entered with the electorate on 1 May. The new Government have got off to the flying, fresh start that the electorate demanded and are getting in the Gracious Speech.

We have already taken the first steps towards delivering our election pledges. Promises that were made in the election will be delivered, and, at the end of the five-year period, we shall go the electorate saying, "We have delivered what we promised," and we shall ask them for the second period that we intend to have. The Gracious Speech is the first step in that direction.

We have set out an ambitious programme of legislation. The shadow Chancellor spoke about the remarkable economy that he had left us. However, the hon. Member for Stone (Mr. Cash) talked about the mess that we were in. It was hard to bring those two statements together.

The Government believe that we have inherited an economy with a fundamental weakness. The Chancellor has shown that he is concerned to create an economy with a long-term record. He is concerned about slow growth and too much economic instability, high unemployment alongside skill shortages, and inadequate investment in education, infrastructure and new technologies.

The previous Government's record of 18 years included two of the longest and deepest recessions that this country has ever experienced. Good businesses went bankrupt, good jobs were destroyed and homes were repossessed in a rollercoaster ride of boom and bust. The electorate have made their judgment on the two different versions about which the House heard during the Queen's Speech debate—whether the economy was successful or whether it had the long-term fundamental problems pointed out by the Chancellor and every Labour Member who contributed to the debate.

We do not see the strongest economy in Europe, as described by the Leader of the Opposition when he opened the debate. Government figures show that, of the

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15 countries in Europe, Britain comes ninth on unemployment, 11th on interest rates, 13th on growth, 14th on trade balance, and bottom of the list at 15th on investment, which is crucial for any developing economy. I hear today that another international report says that Britain's prosperity has improved. We could argue about that, but Britain has simply risen from 19th to 11th place in the league table, which means that we are still in the bottom half of the table of the major economies in Europe. We are not in the top half, never mind being a successful economy.

Sir Peter Tapsell (Louth and Horncastle): The right hon. Gentleman referred to an independent report published today, which points out that the British economy is more competitive now than the economies of Germany, France or Italy. When did Britain last have unemployment at less than 6 per cent. and inflation at less than 2.5 per cent?

Mr. Prescott: It had unemployment at less than that under a Labour Government. That still does not counter the argument that, in all the tables of major economies that we are discussing, Britain is in the bottom half and it has not improved its position a great deal. It has risen only two or three places in a number of the tables and remains in the bottom half.

I find it a bit much when I hear the Government talk about unemployment—[HON. MEMBERS: "You are the Government."] Yes, it has been one of those days.

The Opposition inherited unemployment at below 1 million and took it to nearer 4 million. Even if we take today's figures and allow for the 1 million who are not accounted for in the register of claimants, there is mass unemployment after 18 years, quite apart from all the other indices that I mentioned.

The Chancellor said in his speech today that we intend to restore stability in economic management. That means being tough on inflation and giving immediate priority to seeing how public expenditure can be made more effective. Where appropriate, we shall use public and private partnerships, which we are now reforming. It means switching spending from economic failure to investment and the beginning of the long task of re-equipping the British economy, reforming the welfare state and getting the unemployed back to work. The Chancellor will introduce a number of those measures in the forthcoming Budget. They will be our first steps towards making long-term changes to the economy so that it produces more of the wealth that is necessary to provide the services to which we are committed.

We said that we would waste no time in taking steps to unravel the country's economic problems. That is why, within days of taking office, the Chancellor took the actions that he did. There can be no clearer signal of our determination to fight inflation than to give the Bank of England operational independence to set interest rates while increasing the accountability of the Bank's decision making, as the Chancellor made clear in his statement. The fact that there was an immediate fall in long-term interest rates shows the wisdom of that decision. I have not heard that argument contested by the Opposition. They have not said that it is not to the advantage of the

country to reduce the long-term interest rates, and that was one of the immediate effects of my right hon. Friend's courageous decision.

It is important to recognise that the aim of a high and stable level of employment is part of our central economic objective. That condition has not been laid down before, but it has been brought about in the recent changes made by the Chancellor.

Today, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor has taken further positive steps. In his statement, he announced further changes to the structure of the Bank and the regulation of the City. That should have been done some time ago, but was farked by the Conservative party and is now being carried out by my right hon. Friend. My right hon. Friend also announced that he has invited the National Audit Office to comment on the assumptions and conventions that lie behind the current forecasts and to make a report before the forthcoming Budget. That will add to openness, credibility and stability in economic decision making and will underline our fresh approach to economic policy.

We want to make a fresh start on Britain's relationship with the rest of the European Union. We want to draw a line under the recent past. Within days, my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary signalled that we will sign up to the social chapter—now known as the social agreement—and end the British opt-out. The right hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Sir J. Stanley) made a great deal about the opt-out provision undermining Britain's sovereignty. It is difficult to listen to Opposition Members finding their voice on the opt-out clauses and the reduction of the vetoes on many of the measures in Europe. Those things happened under a Tory Government.

We were taken in to the Common Market by a Tory Government—[*Interruption.*] Yes, it was a bit of a surprise. We gave up the veto under the fishing agreement negotiated by the Tory Government, and, on the single market agreement, the Tories introduced a considerable amount of qualified majority voting. I was curious to see whether the right hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling voted for those measures. On the Second Reading of the Single European Act, he voted for all the changes to qualified majority voting.

Sir John Stanley: The key point is that, when those changes were conceded in the Single European Act—that did take place as the right hon. Gentleman pointed out—it was done in return for real gains in completing the single market. The right hon. Gentleman has made the concessions on the social chapter and got absolutely nothing in return.

Mr. Prescott: It is more to do with the fact that the right hon. Gentleman was a Minister in the Government at the time and he could not vote against the Second Reading. Knowing how he voted, I had to treat his speech about qualified majority voting with a certain amount of contempt.

We want a fresh start in Britain's relationship with the rest of the European Union. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary did that when he signalled that he wanted a sensible balance between social responsibility and economic efficiency. There are crucial issues in that.

Too much has been made of the threat of the social agreement. It does not constitute a threat to jobs. It means that social justice should be seen alongside economic

prosperity. I have never been able to understand why the British owners of a Europe-based company in Hull will not allow the British seamen to take part in discussions on conditions of work while the Belgian and German seamen in the same company can take part. Is it right that British seafarers have to ask the Belgians and the Germans to take up their case with the company? That is wrong and stupid and should not apply. With the signing of the social agreement, we shall get a little more justice on consultation within that firm. That is just one example.

I was curious when the shadow Chancellor said that the Netherlands was beginning to adopt our successful economic formula and deregulation. He argued that the social chapter would contribute to higher levels of unemployment and inflation, but I wondered about the position in the Netherlands. I asked for the information from the Library and discovered that the Netherlands has a lower inflation rate and a lower unemployment rate than Britain. Holland has achieved that, although it has signed up to the social chapter and provided decent working conditions. Conservative Members' argument on the social agreement is a load of nonsense. We have no hesitations about implementing it. We believe that a successful economy has as much to do with social justice as it has to do with economic prosperity, and that the two objectives should be combined, as Holland has managed to do.

Our European policy priorities were stated in Labour's election manifesto and in the Prime Minister's speech in Manchester on 21 April 1997. Those key priorities, which have been reiterated in this debate, are: to complete the single market, to encourage considerable enlargement of it, to reform the common agricultural policy, to tackle unemployment and to ensure effective co-operation in foreign policy. Those are proper objectives for the Government to pursue, and my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary, with considerable panache, has been doing just that in Europe. A co-operative attitude—instead of constant threats of retaliation—has already made a difference in negotiations on fish and beef.

The Government believe that substantial progress can be made by a common approach to transport and environment issues. We shall embrace change when it is in Britain's interests to do so, but we shall stand firm when the national interest demands it. That is our position. We have stated clearly the matters in which we shall retain the veto: frontier controls, taxation, social security, defence decisions, the budget and treaty changes. Those are essential issues in which the national interest is involved.

The United Kingdom, like other member states, is committed to completion of the intergovernmental conference at the Amsterdam European Council, which will meet in a few weeks. We think that the IGC will present an opportunity to make Europe more relevant to ordinary men and women and to prepare for enlargement.

The shadow Chancellor emphasised the importance of unemployment in the European Union—but so do we, because it is right that the European Union should play its part in tackling unemployment. Therefore, we shall join our partners in supporting the employment chapter in the new treaty, because we believe that economic prosperity and social justice can be combined, helping us to reduce unemployment levels in Europe.

On 1 January 1998, Britain will hold the presidency of the European Union, which will provide us with an excellent opportunity to lead from the front in making progress on the business of the European Union. We want Britain to be one of the leading countries in Europe and not one that is lagging behind. We can do much more—it is in Britain's interest to do so—by building a supportive majority among our partners than we can by shouting from the sidelines.

I said that the Government have made a flying start in foreign policy, and that sentiment applies also to other spheres, such as education, employment, health, social security and home affairs. There is a new spirit of aspiration and achievement throughout the Government. That spirit is evident also in the legislation proposed by my own Department, which I shall be proud to introduce.

I listened to the comments on transport made by the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young). He has, however, left us in a situation in which our roads are collapsing, our buses are older and our services are declining. I have had to call in representatives from South West Trains to talk about service cuts, and the rail services regulator has said that he has insufficient powers to ensure that investment is made in rail. That is not the transport system that the right hon. Gentleman described in his speech, but it is the one that I have seen. People have been coming to my door to complain about the privatisation of a transport system with which he was involved.

Let us be clear about it. I am proud that the programme that the Government will introduce will involve co-ordination of regional economic development and regional development agencies. Over 18 years, I fought hard for that principle, and I am now proud to find myself in a position in which I can provide the English regions with English regional development agencies that have power that is equal to that of agencies in Scotland and Wales. Those regions will gain advantages that they were denied by the Conservative party when it was in government. It is an important issue, and there will be a great debate on it.

The right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire mentioned capital receipts. The Government plan to introduce a Bill dealing with local authority capital receipts, and he said that we can do so only because the previous Government left us the money to do so. The previous Government, however, did not build houses with that money—they denied the public 100,000 houses. At Christmas, he made much of homelessness. At the same time, however, he was denying an opportunity to build new houses. That is the difference between the two parties and the two Governments. We shall get on with getting people back to work and building houses for people. It is a scandal that the situation has been allowed to continue.

We are delighted to introduce legislation to give London a government that will make decisions for it and be accountable to Londoners. It is a disgrace that there has been no strategic authority for London during the past two decades and our legislation will put that right.

The debate has reflected the differences between the two parties, but it has also reflected something else. While we have been debating with the Opposition our different views on the Queen's Speech, they have been conducting a debate among themselves about who will be their next Leader. The Conservatives will have to make the sort of

[Mr. Prescott]

changes that the Labour party did. It took us 18 years; some Conservatives say that it will take them twice as long, which will be 36 years. I wish them well in that process and I look forward to them making the sort of radical democratic changes that the Labour party did. The electorate recognised those changes and elected us on a different set of values, which we shall present to the country in the next five years.

In contrast to the Opposition, we have a Prime Minister who has the demonstrable support of his party. This is a Government with a clear economic agenda.

Mr. Peter Bottomley (Worthing, West): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. If a speech has continued past 10 o'clock, what happens to the Loyal Address?

Madam Speaker: I shall put the Question on the Loyal Address.

Question put, That the amendment be made:—

The House proceeded to a Division—

Sir Peter Emery (East Devon) (*seated and covered*): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. How is it that, when the motion on the Loyal Address falls at 10 o'clock, you put the motion to the House at 20 seconds past 10? The motion should have fallen, because the Government failed to decide whether they wished to have a vote on it. The Division should not be allowed now, because the motion fell at 10 o'clock, not 20 seconds past 10.

Madam Speaker: As a former member of the Procedure Committee, the right hon. Gentleman should understand the answer to his question. Will hon. Members now proceed to vote? I am in a hurry to get the vote through.

Sir Peter Emery (*seated and covered*): Further to that point of order, Madam Speaker. I am sorry, but I do not understand what you have said to me. Are you trying to say to the House that you may put a motion 20 seconds after it has fallen? If that is so, it is entirely contrary to both "Erskine May" and the normal procedure of the House.

Madam Speaker: I am saying to the right hon. Member clearly that, had not a Conservative Member put a point of order, I would have put the Question immediately, at 10 o'clock. Now, will hon. Members go through and vote?

Sir Peter Emery (*seated and covered*): Further to that point of order, Madam Speaker. As the hon. Member who rose—my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing, West (Mr. Bottomley)—did so to point out to you that it was past 10 o'clock, it cannot be right to suggest that he was doing other than that. Therefore, to put the motion when you did was quite illegal.

Madam Speaker: I put the motion quite correctly and at the appropriate time. The Division has now been called, and I invite hon. Members to divide the House.

The House having divided: Ayes 156, Noes 446.

Division No. 2]

[10 pm

AYES

Ainsworth, Peter (*E Surrey*)
 Amess, David
 Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
 Arbuthnot, James
 Atkinson, David (*Bour'mth E*)
 Atkinson, Peter (*Hexham*)
 Baldry, Tony
 Bercow, John
 Beresford, Sir Paul
 Blunt, Crispin
 Body, Sir Richard
 Boswell, Tim
 Bottomley, Peter (*Worthing W*)
 Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
 Brady, Graham
 Brazier, Julian
 Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
 Browning, Mrs Angela
 Bruce, Ian (*S Dorset*)
 Burns, Simon
 Butterfill, John
 Cash, William
 Chapman, Sir Sydney
 (*Chipping Barnet*)
 Chope, Christopher
 Clappison, James
 Clark, Rt Hon Alan (*Kensington*)
 Clark, Dr Michael (*Rayleigh*)
 Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth
 (*Rushcliffe*)
 Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
 Collins, Tim
 Colvin, Michael
 Cormack, Sir Patrick
 Cran, James
 Curry, Rt Hon David
 Davis, Rt Hon David (*Haltemprice*)
 Davies, Quentin
 (*Grantham & Stamford*)
 Day, Stephen
 Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
 Duncan, Alan
 Duncan Smith, Iain
 Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
 Evans, Nigel
 Faber, David
 Fabricant, Michael
 Fallon, Michael
 Flight, Howard
 Forth, Eric
 Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
 Fox, Dr Liam
 Fraser, Christopher
 Gale, Roger
 Garnier, Edward
 Gibb, Nick
 Gill, Christopher
 Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
 Goodlad, Rt Hon Alastair
 Gorman, Mrs Teresa
 Gray, James
 Green, Damian
 Greenway, John
 Grieve, Dominic
 Gummer, Rt Hon John
 Hague, Rt Hon William
 Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archibald
 Hammond, Philip
 Hawkins, Nick
 Hayes, John
 Heald, Oliver
 Heath, Rt Hon Sir Edward
 (*Old Bexley & Sidcup*)
 Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
 Heseltine, Rt Hon Michael
 Horam, John
 Howard, Rt Hon Michael
 Howarth, Gerald (*Aldershot*)
 Hunter, Andrew
 Jack, Rt Hon Michael
 Jackson, Robert (*Wantage*)
 Jenkin, Bernard (*N Essex*)
 Johnson Smith,
 Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
 Key, Robert
 King, Rt Hon Tom (*Bridgwater*)
 Kirkbride, Miss Julie
 Laing, Mrs Eleanor
 Lansley, Andrew
 Leigh, Edward
 Letwin, Oliver
 Lewis, Dr Julian (*New Forest E*)
 Lidington, David
 Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
 Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter (*Fareham*)
 Loughton, Tim
 Luff, Peter
 Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
 MacGregor, Rt Hon John
 McIntosh, Miss Anne
 MacKay, Andrew
 Maclean, Rt Hon David
 McLoughlin, Patrick
 Madel, Sir David
 Major, Rt Hon John
 Malins, Humphrey
 Maples, John
 Mates, Michael
 Mawhinney, Rt Hon Dr Brian
 May, Mrs Theresa
 Merchant, Piers
 Moss, Malcolm
 Nicholls, Patrick
 Norman, Archie
 Page, Richard
 Paice, James
 Paterson, Owen
 Pickles, Eric
 Prior, David
 Redwood, Rt Hon John
 Robathan, Andrew
 Robertson, Laurence (*Tewk'b'ry*)
 Roe, Mrs Marion (*Broxbourne*)
 Rowe, Andrew (*Faversham*)
 Ruffley, David
 St Aubyn, Nick
 Sayeed, Jonathan
 Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
 Simpson, Keith (*Mid-Norfolk*)
 Soames, Nicholas
 Spelman, Mrs Caroline
 Spicer, Sir Michael
 Spring, Richard
 Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
 Steen, Anthony
 Streeter, Gary
 Swayne, Desmond
 Syms, Robert
 Tapsell, Sir Peter
 Taylor, Ian (*Esher & Walton*)
 Taylor, John M (*Solihull*)
 Taylor, Sir Teddy
 Temple-Morris, Peter
 Townend, John
 Tredinnick, David
 Trend, Michael

Tyrie, Andrew
 Viggers, Peter
 Walter, Robert
 Wardle, Charles
 Waterson, Nigel
 Whitney, Sir Raymond
 Whittingdale, John
 Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
 Wilkinson, John

Willetts, David
 Wishire, David
 Winterton, Nicholas (*Macclesfield*)
 Woodward, Shaun
 Yeo, Tim
 Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Richard Ottaway and
Mr. Bowen Wells.

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
 Adams, Mrs Irene (*Paisley N*)
 Ainger, Nick
 Ainsworth, Robert (*Cov'try NE*)
 Allan, Richard (*Sheffield Hallam*)
 Allen, Graham (*Nottingham N*)
 Anderson, Donald (*Swansea E*)
 Anderson, Ms Janet (*Ros'dale*)
 Armstrong, Ms Hilary
 Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
 Ashton, Joseph
 Atherton, Ms Candy
 Atkins, Ms Charlotte
 Austin, John
 Baker, Norman
 Ballard, Mrs Jackie
 Banks, Tony
 Barnes, Harry
 Barron, Kevin
 Bayley, Hugh
 Beard, Nigel
 Begg, Ms Anne (*Aber'd'n S*)
 Beith, Rt Hon A J
 Bell, Stuart (*Middlesbrough*)
 Benn, Rt Hon Tony
 Bennett, Andrew F
 Benton, Joe
 Bermingham, Gerald
 Berry, Roger
 Best, Harold
 Betts, Clive
 Blackman, Ms Elizabeth
 Blair, Rt Hon Tony
 Blears, Ms Hazel
 Blizzard, Robert
 Blunkett, Rt Hon David
 Boateng, Paul
 Borrow, David
 Bradley, Keith (*Withington*)
 Bradley, Peter (*The Wrekin*)
 Bradshaw, Ben
 Brake, Thomas
 Brand, Dr Peter
 Breed, Colin
 Brinton, Ms Helen
 Brown, Rt Hon Gordon
 (*Dunfermline E*)
 Brown, Rt Hon Nicholas
 (*Newcastle E & Wallsend*)
 Brown, Russell (*Dumfries*)
 Browne, Desmond (*Kilmarnock*)
 Bruce, Malcolm (*Gordon*)
 Buck, Ms Karen
 Burden, Richard
 Burgon, Colin
 Burnett, John
 Burstow, Paul
 Butler, Christine
 Byers, Stephen
 Cable, Dr Vincent
 Caborn, Richard
 Campbell, Alan (*Tynemouth*)
 Campbell, Mrs Anne (*C'bridge*)
 Campbell, Menzies (*NE Fife*)

Campbell, Ronnie (*Blyth V*)
 Campbell-Savours, D N
 Canavan, Dennis
 Cann, Jamie
 Caplin, Ivor
 Casale, Roger
 Caton, Martin
 Cawsey, Ian
 Chapman, Ben (*Wirral S*)
 Chaytor, David
 Chidgey, David
 Clapham, Michael
 Clark, Rt Hon Dr David (*S Shields*)
 Clark, Dr Lynda
 (*Edinburgh Pentlands*)
 Clark, Paul (*Gillingham*)
 Clarke, Charles (*Norwich S*)
 Clarke, Eric (*Midlothian*)
 Clarke, Tom (*Coatbridge*)
 Clarke, Tony (*Northampton S*)
 Clwyd, Mrs Ann
 Coaker, Vernon
 Coffey, Ms Ann
 Cohen, Harry
 Coleman, Iain
 Colman, Anthony
 Connarty, Michael
 Cook, Frank (*Stockton N*)
 Cook, Rt Hon Robin (*Livingston*)
 Cooper, Ms Yvette
 Corbett, Robin
 Corbyn, Jeremy
 Corston, Ms Jean
 Cotter, Brian
 Cousins, Jim
 Cox, Tom
 Cranston, Ross
 Crausby, David
 Cryer, Mrs Ann (*Keighley*)
 Cryer, John (*Hornchurch*)
 Cummings, John
 Cunliffe, Lawrence
 Cunningham, Jim (*Cov'try S*)
 Cunningham, Ms Roseanna
 (*Perth*)
 Curtis-Thomas, Ms Clare
 Dafis, Cynog
 Dalyell, Tam
 Davill, Keith
 Davey, Edward (*Kingston*)
 Davey, Valerie (*Bristol W*)
 Davies, Rt Hon Denzil (*Llanelli*)
 Davies, Geraint (*Croydon C*)
 Davies, Rt Hon Ron (*Caerphilly*)
 Davis, Terry (*B'ham Hodge H*)
 Dawson, Hilton
 Dean, Ms Janet
 Denham, John
 Dewar, Rt Hon Donald
 Dismore, Andrew
 Dobbin, Jim
 Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
 Donohoe, Brian H
 Doran, Frank

Dowd, Jim
 Drew, David
 Drown, Ms Julia
 Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
 Eagle, Ms Angela (*Walsley*)
 Eagle, Ms Maria (*L'pool Garston*)
 Edwards, Huw
 Efford, Clive
 Ellman, Ms Louise
 Ennis, Jeff
 Etherington, Bill
 Ewing, Mrs Margaret
 Fatchett, Derek
 Fearn, Ronnie
 Field, Frank
 Fisher, Mark
 Fitzpatrick, Jim
 Fitzsimons, Ms Lorna
 Flint, Ms Caroline
 Flynn, Paul
 Follett, Ms Barbara
 Foster, Rt Hon Derek
 Foster, Don (*Bath*)
 Foster, Michael Jabez (*Hastings*)
 Foster, Michael John (*Worcester*)
 Fyfe, Maria
 Galbraith, Sam
 Galloway, George
 Gapes, Mike
 Gardiner, Barry
 George, Andrew (*St Ives*)
 George, Bruce (*Walsall S*)
 Gerrard, Neil
 Gibson, Dr Ian
 Gilroy, Mrs Linda
 Godman, Dr Norman A
 Godsiff, Roger
 Goggins, Paul
 Golding, Mrs Llin
 Gordon, Mrs Eileen
 Gorrie, Donald
 Graham, Thomas
 Grant, Bernie
 Griffiths, Ms Jane (*Reading E*)
 Griffiths, Nigel (*Edinburgh S*)
 Griffiths, Win (*Bridgend*)
 Grocott, Bruce
 Grogan, John
 Gunnell, John
 Hain, Peter
 Hall, Mike (*Weaver Vale*)
 Hall, Patrick (*Bedford*)
 Hamilton, Fabian (*Leeds NE*)
 Hancock, Mike
 Hanson, David
 Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
 Harris, Dr Evan
 Harvey, Nick
 Heal, Mrs Sylvia
 Heath, David (*Somerton*)
 Henderson, Doug (*Newcastle N*)
 Henderson, Ivan (*Harwich*)
 Hepburn, Stephen
 Heppell, John
 Hesford, Stephen
 Hewitt, Ms Patricia
 Hill, Keith
 Hinchliffe, David
 Hodge, Ms Margaret
 Hoey, Kate
 Home Robertson, John
 Hood, Jimmy
 Hoon, Geoffrey
 Hope, Philip
 Hopkins, Kelvin
 Howarth, Alan (*Newport E*)

Howarth, George (*Knowsley N*)
 Howells, Dr Kim
 Hoyle, Lindsay
 Hughes, Ms Beverley
 (*Stretford & Urmston*)
 Hughes, Kevin (*Doncaster N*)
 Hughes, Simon (*Southwark N*)
 Humble, Mrs Joan
 Hurst, Alan
 Hutton, John
 Iddon, Brian
 Illsley, Eric
 Ingram, Adam
 Jackson, Ms Glenda (*Hampstead*)
 Jackson, Mrs Helen (*Hillsborough*)
 Jamieson, David
 Jenkins, Brian (*Tamworth*)
 Johnson, Alan (*Hull W*)
 Johnson, Miss Melanie
 (*Welwyn Hatfield*)
 Jones, Barry (*Alyn & Deeside*)
 Jones, Ms Fiona (*Newark*)
 Jones, Helen (*Warrington N*)
 Jones, Ieuan Wyn (*Ynys Môn*)
 Jones, Ms Jenny
 (*Wolverhampton SW*)
 Jones, Jon Owen (*Cardiff C*)
 Jones, Dr Lynne (*Selly Oak*)
 Jones, Martyn (*Chwyd S*)
 Jones, Nigel (*Cheltenham*)
 Jowell, Ms Tessa
 Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
 Keeble, Ms Sally
 Keen, Alan (*Feltham*)
 Keen, Mrs Ann (*Brentford*)
 Keetch, Paul
 Kelly, Ms Ruth
 Kemp, Fraser
 Kennedy, Charles
 (*Ross Skye & Inverness W*)
 Khabra, Piana S
 Kidney, David
 Kilfoyle, Peter
 King, Miss Oona (*Bethnal Green*)
 Kingham, Tessa
 Kirkwood, Archy
 Kumar, Dr Ashok
 Ladyman, Dr Stephen
 Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
 Laxton, Bob
 Lepper, David
 Leslie, Christopher
 Levitt, Tom
 Lewis, Ivan (*Bury S*)
 Lewis, Terry (*Worsley*)
 Liddell, Mrs Helen
 Linton, Martin
 Livingstone, Ken
 Livsey, Richard
 Lloyd, Tony (*Manchester C*)
 Lwyd, Elyn
 Lock, David
 Love, Andy
 McAllion, John
 McAvooy, Thomas
 McCabe, Stephen
 McCafferty, Ms Christine
 McDonagh, Ms Siobhain
 Macdonald, Calum
 McDonnell, John
 McFall, John
 McGuire, Mrs Anne
 McIsaac, Ms Shona
 McKenna, Ms Rosemary
 Mackinlay, Andrew
 McLeish, Henry

MacLennan, Robert
 McMaster, Gordon
 McNulty, Tony
 MacShane, Denis
 Mactaggart, Fiona
 McWalter, Tony
 McWilliam, John
 Mahon, Mrs Alice
 Mailaber, Ms Judy
 Mandelson, Peter
 Marek, Dr John
 Marsden, Gordon (*Blackpool S*)
 Marsden, Paul (*Shrewsbury*)
 Marshall, David (*Shettleston*)
 Marshall, Jim (*Leicester S*)
 Marshall-Andrews, Robert
 Martlew, Eric
 Maxton, John
 Meacher, Michael
 Meale, Alan
 Michael, Alun
 Michie, Mrs Ray (*Argyll Bute*)
 Milburn, Alan
 Miller, Andrew
 Mitchell, Austin
 Moffatt, Laura
 Moonie, Dr Lewis
 Moore, Michael
 Moran, Ms Margaret
 Morgan, Alasdair (*Galloway*)
 Morgan, Ms Julie (*Cardiff N*)
 Morgan, Rhodri (*Cardiff W*)
 Morley, Elliot
 Morris, Ms Estelle (*B'ham Yardley*)
 Mountford, Ms Kali
 Mudie, George
 Mullin, Chris
 Murphy, Dennis (*Wansbeck*)
 Murphy, Jim (*Eastwood*)
 Murphy, Paul (*Torfaen*)
 Naysmith, Dr Doug
 Norris, Dan
 Oaten, Mark
 O'Brien, Mike (*N Warks*)
 O'Brien, William (*Normanton*)
 O'Hara, Edward
 Oiler, Bill
 Opik, Lembit
 Organ, Mrs Diana
 Osborne, Mrs Sandra
 Palmer, Nick
 Pearson, Ian
 Pendry, Tom
 Perham, Ms Linda
 Pickthall, Colin
 Pike, Peter L
 Plaskitt, James
 Pollard, Kerry
 Pond, Chris
 Pope, Greg
 Pound, Stephen
 Powell, Sir Raymond
 Prentice, Ms Bridget (*Lewisham E*)
 Prentice, Gordon (*Pendle*)
 Prescott, Rt Hon John
 Primaroko, Dawn
 Prosser, Gwyn
 Purchase, Ken
 Quin, Ms Joyce (*Gateshead E*)
 Quinn, Lawrie (*Scarborough*)
 Radice, Giles
 Rammell, Bill
 Rapson, Syd
 Raynsford, Nick
 Reed, Andrew (*Loughborough*)
 Rendel, David

Robinson, Geoffrey (*Cov'try NW*)
 Roche, Mrs Barbara
 Rogers, Allan
 Rooker, Jeff
 Rooney, Terry
 Ross, Ernie (*Dundee W*)
 Rowlands, Ted
 Roy, Frank
 Ruane, Chris
 Ruddock, Ms Joan
 Russell, Bob (*Colchester*)
 Russell, Ms Christine (*Chester*)
 Ryan, Ms Joan
 Salmond, Alex
 Salter, Martin
 Sanders, Adrian
 Savidge, Malcolm
 Sawford, Philip
 Sedgemore, Brian
 Shaw, Jonathan
 Sheerman, Barry
 Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
 Shipley, Ms Debra
 Short, Rt Hon Clare
 Simpson, Alan (*Nottingham S*)
 Singh, Marsha
 Skinner, Dennis
 Smith, Andrew (*Oxford E*)
 Smith, Ms Angela (*Basildon*)
 Smith, Rt Hon Chris (*Islington S*)
 Smith, Ms Jacqui (*Redditch*)
 Smith, John (*Glamorgan*)
 Smith, Llew (*Blaenau Gwent*)
 Smith, Sir Robert (*W Ab'd'ns*)
 Snape, Peter
 Soley, Clive
 Southworth, Ms Helen
 Spellar, John
 Squire, Ms Rachel
 Starkey, Dr Phyllis
 Steinberg, Gerry
 Stevenson, George
 Stewart, David (*Inverness E*)
 Stewart, Ian (*Eccles*)
 Stinchcombe, Paul
 Stoate, Dr Howard
 Stott, Roger
 Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
 Stringer, Graham
 Stuart, Mrs Gisela (*Edgbaston*)
 Stunell, Andrew
 Sutcliffe, Gerry
 Swinney, John
 Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann
 (*Dewsbury*)
 Taylor, Ms Dari (*Stockton S*)
 Taylor, David (*NW Leics*)
 Taylor, Matthew
 (*Truro & St Austell*)
 Thomas, Gareth (*Clwyd W*)
 Thomas, Gareth R (*Harrow W*)
 Timms, Stephen
 Tipping, Paddy
 Todd, Mark
 Toñge, Dr Jenny
 Touhig, Don
 Trickett, Jon
 Truswell, Paul
 Turner, Dennis (*Wolverhampton SE*)
 Turner, Desmond (*Kempstown*)
 Turner, Dr George (*NW Norfolk*)
 Twigg, Derek (*Halton*)
 Twigg, Stephen (*Enfield*)
 Tyler, Paul
 Vaz, Keith
 Vis, Rudolf

Wallace, James
 Walley, Ms Joan
 Wareing, Robert N
 Watts, David
 Webb, Steven
 Welsh, Andrew
 Whitehead, Alan
 Wicks, Malcolm
 Wigley, Dafydd
 Williams, Rt Hon Alan
 (*Swansea W*)
 Williams, Alan W (*E Carmarthen*)
 Williams, Mrs Betty (*Conwy*)
 Willis, Phil

Wills, Michael
 Winnick, David
 Winterton, Ms Rosie (*Doncaster C*)
 Wise, Audrey
 Wood, Mike
 Woolas, Phil
 Worthington, Tony
 Wray, James
 Wright, Dr Tony (*Cannock*)
 Wright, Tony (*Gr Yarmouth*)
 Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
 Jane Kennedy and
 Mr. David Clelland.

Question accordingly negated.

Amendment proposed, at the end of the Question, to add,

"but, while welcoming the inclusion in the Gracious Speech of reforming measures such as the incorporation of the European Convention on Human Rights into United Kingdom law, the granting of autonomy in setting interest rates to the Bank of England, the introduction of regional development agencies and the proposals to grant devolution for Scotland and Wales, humbly regret the absence of any commitment to provide sufficient resources to raise standards in education and resolve the funding crisis in the National Health Service; further regret the absence of any stated timetable for the introduction of electoral reform for elections to the European Parliament and a Freedom of Information Act; are concerned by the absence of measures which will protect the environment, and the lack of urgency in the introduction of measures to redress the reduction of responsibility which has been suffered by local authorities; and believe that the retrospective and regressive windfall tax is an inadequate means of funding the necessary programmes to get the young unemployed back to work."—
 [Mr. Malcolm Bruce.]

Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 33 (Calling of amendments at end of debate), That the amendment be made:—

The House divided: Ayes 54, Noes 380.

Division No. 3]

[10.24 pm

AYES

Allan, Richard (*Sheff'd Hallam*)
 Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
 Baker, Norman
 Ballard, Mrs Jackie
 Beith, Rt Hon A J
 Brake, Thomas
 Brand, Dr Peter
 Breed, Colin
 Bruce, Malcolm (*Gordon*)
 Burnett, John
 Burstow, Paul
 Cable, Dr Vincent
 Campbell, Menzies (*NE Fife*)
 Chidgey, David
 Cotter, Brian
 Cunningham, Ms Roseanna
 (*Perth*)
 Dafis, Cynog
 Davey, Edward (*Kingston*)
 Ewing, Mrs Margaret
 Fearn, Ronnie
 Foster, Don (*Bath*)
 George, Andrew (*St Ives*)
 Gornie, Donald
 Hancock, Mike
 Harris, Dr Evan
 Harvey, Nick
 Heath, David (*Somerton*)
 Hughes, Simon (*Southwark N*)

Jones, Ieuan Wyn (*Ynys Môn*)
 Jones, Nigel (*Cheltenham*)
 Keetch, Paul
 Kennedy, Charles
 (*Ross Skye & Inverness W*)
 Kirkwood, Archy
 Livsey, Richard
 Llwyd, Elyn
 MacLennan, Robert
 Michie, Mrs Ray (*Argyll Bute*)
 Moore, Michael
 Morgan, Alasdair (*Galloway*)
 Oaten, Mark
 Opik, Lembit
 Rendel, David
 Russell, Bob (*Colchester*)
 Salmond, Alex
 Sanders, Adrian
 Smith, Sir Robert (*W Ab'd'ns*)
 Swinney, John
 Taylor, Matthew
 (*Truro & St Austell*)
 Tonge, Dr Jenny
 Wallace, James
 Webb, Steven

Welsh, Andrew
Wigley, Dafydd
Willis, Phil

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Paul Tyler and
Mr. Andrew Stunell.

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Adams, Mrs Irene (*Paisley N*)
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert (*Cov'try NE*)
Allen, Graham (*Nottingham N*)
Anderson, Donald (*Swansea E*)
Anderson, Ms Janet (*Ros'dale*)
Armstrong, Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joseph
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Ms Charlotte
Austin, John
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Begg, Ms Anne (*Aber'd'n S*)
Bell, Stuart (*Middlesbrough*)
Benn, Rt Hon Tony
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Birmingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Ms Elizabeth
Bleas, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Robert
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Boateng, Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith (*Withington*)
Bradley, Peter (*The Wrekin*)
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Ms Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Nicholas
(*Newcastle E & Wallsend*)
Brown, Russell (*Dumfries*)
Browne, Desmond (*Kilmarnock*)
Buck, Ms Karen
Burdens, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Christine
Byers, Stephen
Caborn, Richard
Campbell, Alan (*Tynemouth*)
Campbell, Mrs Anne (*C'bridge*)
Campbell, Ronnie (*Blyth V*)
Campbell-Savours, D N
Canavan, Dennis
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben (*Wirral S*)
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David (*S Shields*)
Clark, Dr Lynda
(*Edinburgh Pentlands*)
Clark, Paul (*Gillingham*)
Clarke, Charles (*Norwich S*)
Clarke, Eric (*Midlothian*)
Clarke, Tom (*Coatbridge*)
Clarke, Tony (*Northampton S*)
Clwyd, Mrs Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann

Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Anthony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank (*Stockton N*)
Cook, Rt Hon Robin (*Livingston*)
Cooper, Ms Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Ms Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann (*Keighley*)
Cryer, John (*Hornchurch*)
Cummings, John
Cunliffe, Lawrence
Cunningham, Jim (*Cov'try S*)
Curtis-Thomas, Ms Clare
Dalyell, Tam
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie (*Bristol W*)
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil (*Llanelli*)
Davies, Geraint (*Croydon C*)
Davies, Rt Hon Ron (*Caerphilly*)
Davis, Terry (*B'ham Hodge H*)
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Ms Janet
Denham, John
Dewar, Rt Hon Donald
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Drown, Ms Julia
Eagle, Ms Angela (*Wallasey*)
Eagle, Ms Maria (*L'pool Garston*)
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Ms Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Fatchett, Derek
Field, Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Ms Lorna
Flint, Ms Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Ms Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael Jabez (*Hastings*)
Foster, Michael John (*Worcester*)
Fyfe, Maïa
Galbraith, Sam
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Bruce (*Walsall S*)
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin

Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Graham, Thomas
Grant, Bernie
Griffiths, Ms Jane (*Reading E*)
Griffiths, Nigel (*Edinburgh S*)
Griffiths, Win (*Bridgend*)
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Gunnell, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike (*Weaver Vale*)
Hall, Patrick (*Bedford*)
Hamilton, Fabian (*Leeds NE*)
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Henderson, Doug (*Newcastle N*)
Henderson, Ivan (*Harwich*)
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Home Robertson, John
Hood, Jimmy
Hoon, Geoffrey
Hope, Philip
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Alan (*Newport E*)
Howarth, George (*Knowsley N*)
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley
(*Stretford & Urmston*)
Hughes, Kevin (*Doncaster N*)
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Brian
Illsley, Eric
Ingram, Adam
Jackson, Ms Glenda (*Hampst'd*)
Jackson, Mrs Helen (*Hillsborough*)
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian (*Tarnworth*)
Johnson, Alan (*Hull W*)
Johnson, Miss Melanie
(*Welwyn Hatfield*)
Jones, Barry (*Alyn & Deeside*)
Jones, Ms Fiona (*Newark*)
Jones, Helen (*Warrington N*)
Jones, Ms Jenny
(*Wolverh'ton SW*)
Jones, Jon Owen (*Cardiff C*)
Jones, Dr Lynne (*Selly Oak*)
Jones, Martyn (*Clwyd S*)
Jowell, Ms Tessa
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan (*Feltham*)
Keen, Mrs Ann (*Brentford*)
Kelly, Ms Ruth
Kemp, Fraser
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Miss Oona (*Bethnal Green*)
Kingham, Tessa
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David

Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan (*Bury S*)
Lewis, Terry (*Worsley*)
Linton, Martin
Livingstone, Ken
Lloyd, Tony (*Manchester C*)
Lock, David
Love, Andy
McAllion, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Stephen
McCafferty, Ms Christine
McDonagh, Ms Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Ms Shona
McKenna, Ms Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McLeish, Henry
McMaster, Gordon
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Ms Judy
Mandelson, Peter
Marek, Dr John
Marsden, Gordon (*Blackpool S*)
Marsden, Paul (*Shrewsbury*)
Marshall, David (*Shettleston*)
Marshall, Jim (*Leicester S*)
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meacher, Michael
Meale, Alan
Michael, Alun
Milburn, Alan
Miller, Andrew
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie (*Cardiff N*)
Morgan, Rhodri (*Cardiff W*)
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Ms Estelle (*B'ham Yardley*)
Mountford, Ms Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Dennis (*Wansbeck*)
Murphy, Jim (*Eastwood*)
Murphy, Paul (*Tortaeen*)
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Mike (*N Warks*)
O'Brien, William (*Normanton*)
O'Hara, Edward
Olin, Bill
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Mrs Sandra
Palmer, Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond

- Prentice, Ms Bridget (*Lewisham E*)
 Prentice, Gordon (*Pendle*)
 Prescott, Rt Hon John
 Primarolo, Dawn
 Prosser, Gwyn
 Purchase, Ken
 Quin, Ms Joyce (*Gateshead E*)
 Quinn, Lawrie (*Scarborough*)
 Radice, Giles
 Rammell, Bill
 Rapson, Syd
 Raynsford, Nick
 Reed, Andrew (*Loughborough*)
 Robinson, Geoffrey (*Cov'try NW*)
 Roche, Mrs Barbara
 Rogers, Allan
 Rooker, Jeff
 Rooney, Terry
 Ross, Ernie (*Dundee W*)
 Rowlands, Ted
 Roy, Frank
 Ruane, Chris
 Ruddock, Ms Joan
 Russell, Ms Christine (*Chester*)
 Ryan, Ms Joan
 Salter, Martin
 Savidge, Malcolm
 Sawford, Philip
 Sedgemore, Brian
 Shaw, Jonathan
 Sheerman, Barry
 Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
 Shipley, Ms Debra
 Short, Rt Hon Clare
 Simpson, Alan (*Nottingham S*)
 Singh, Marsha
 Skinner, Dennis
 Smith, Andrew (*Oxford E*)
 Smith, Ms Angela (*Basildon*)
 Smith, Rt Hon Chris (*Islington S*)
 Smith, Ms Jacqui (*Redditch*)
 Smith, John (*Glamorgan*)
 Smith, Llew (*Blaenau Gwent*)
 Snape, Peter
 Southworth, Ms Helen
 Spellar, John
 Squire, Ms Rachel
 Starkey, Dr Phyllis
 Steinberg, Gerry
 Stevenson, George
 Stewart, David (*Inverness E*)
 Stewart, Ian (*Eccles*)
 Stinchcombe, Paul
 Stoate, Dr Howard
 Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
 Stringer, Graham
 Stuart, Mrs Gisela (*Edgbaston*)
 Sutcliffe, Gerry
 Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann
 (*Dewsbury*)
 Taylor, Ms Dari (*Stockton S*)
 Taylor, David (*NW Leics*)
 Thomas, Gareth (*Clwyd W*)
 Thomas, Gareth R (*Harlow W*)
 Timms, Stephen
 Tipping, Paddy
 Todd, Mark
 Toughig, Don
 Trickett, Jon
 Truswell, Paul
 Turner, Dennis (*Wolverhampton SE*)
 Turner, Desmond (*Kempston*)
 Turner, Dr George (*NW Norfolk*)
 Twigg, Derek (*Halton*)
 Twigg, Stephen (*Enfield*)
 Vaz, Keith
 Vis, Rudolf
 Walley, Ms Joan
 Wareing, Robert N
 Watts, David
 Whitehead, Alan
 Williams, Rt Hon Alan
 (*Swansea W*)
 Williams, Alan W (*E Carmarthen*)
 Williams, Mrs Betty (*Conwy*)
 Winnick, David
 Winterton, Ms Rosie (*Doncaster C*)
 Wise, Audrey
 Wood, Mike
 Woolas, Phil
 Worthington, Tony
 Wray, James
 Wright, Dr Tony (*Cannock*)
 Wright, Tony (*Gl Yarmouth*)
 Wyatt, Derek
 Borrow, David
 Bradley, Keith (*Withington*)
 Bradley, Peter (*The Wrekin*)
 Bradshaw, Ben
 Brake, Thomas
 Brand, Dr Peter
 Brinton, Ms Helen
 Brown, Rt Hon Nicholas
 (*Newcastle E & Wallsend*)
 Brown, Russell (*Dumfries*)
 Browne, Desmond (*Kilmarnock*)
 Bruce, Malcolm (*Gordon*)
 Buck, Ms Karen
 Burden, Richard
 Burgon, Colin
 Burnett, John
 Burstow, Paul
 Butler, Christine
 Byers, Stephen
 Caborn, Richard
 Campbell, Alan (*Tynemouth*)
 Campbell, Mrs Anne (*C'bridge*)
 Campbell, Menzies (*NE Fife*)
 Campbell, Ronnie (*Blyth V*)
 Campbell-Savours, D N
 Canavan, Dennis
 Cann, Jamie
 Caplin, Ivor
 Casale, Roger
 Caton, Martin
 Cawsey, Ian
 Chapman, Ben (*Wirral S*)
 Chaytor, David
 Chidgey, David
 Clapham, Michael
 Clark, Rt Hon Dr David (*S Shields*)
 Clark, Dr Lynda
 (*Edinburgh Pentlands*)
 Clark, Paul (*Gillingham*)
 Clarke, Charles (*Norwich S*)
 Clarke, Eric (*Midlothian*)
 Clarke, Tom (*Coatbridge*)
 Clarke, Tony (*Northampton S*)
 Clwyd, Mrs Ann
 Coaker, Vernon
 Coffey, Ms Ann
 Cohen, Harry
 Coleman, Iain
 Colman, Anthony
 Connarty, Michael
 Cook, Frank (*Stockton N*)
 Cook, Rt Hon Robin (*Livingston*)
 Cooper, Ms Yvette
 Corbett, Robin
 Corbyn, Jeremy
 Corston, Ms Jean
 Cotter, Brian
 Cousins, Jim
 Cox, Tom
 Cranston, Ross
 Crausby, David
 Cryer, Mrs Ann (*Keighley*)
 Cryer, John (*Hornchurch*)
 Cummings, John
 Cunliffe, Lawrence
 Cunningham, Jim (*Cov'try S*)
 Curtis-Thomas, Ms Clare
 Dalrymple, Tam
 Darvill, Keith
 Davey, Edward (*Kingston*)
 Davey, Valerie (*Bristol W*)
 Davies, Rt Hon Denzil (*Llanelli*)
 Davies, Geraint (*Croydon C*)
 Davies, Rt Hon Ron (*Caerphilly*)
 Davis, Terry (*B'ham Hodge H*)
 Dawson, Hilton
 Dean, Ms Janet
 Denham, John
 Dewar, Rt Hon Donald
 Dismore, Andrew
 Dobbin, Jim
 Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
 Donohoe, Brian H
 Doran, Frank
 Dowd, Jim
 Drew, David
 Drown, Ms Julia
 Eagle, Ms Angela (*Wallasey*)
 Eagle, Ms Maria (*L'pool Garston*)
 Edwards, Huw
 Efford, Clive
 Eilman, Ms Louise
 Ennis, Jeff
 Etherington, Bill
 Falchett, Derek
 Fearn, Ronnie
 Field, Frank
 Fisher, Mark
 Fitzpatrick, Jim
 Fitzsimons, Ms Loma
 Flint, Ms Caroline
 Flynn, Paul
 Follett, Ms Barbara
 Foster, Rt Hon Derek
 Foster, Don (*Bath*)
 Foster, Michael Jabez (*Hastings*)
 Foster, Michael John (*Worcester*)
 Fyfe, Maria
 Galbraith, Sam
 Galloway, George
 Gapes, Mike
 Gardiner, Barry
 George, Andrew (*St Ives*)
 George, Bruce (*Walsall S*)
 Gerrard, Neil
 Gibson, Dr Ian
 Gilroy, Mrs Linda
 Godman, Dr Norman A
 Godsiff, Roger
 Goggins, Paul
 Golding, Mrs Llin
 Gordon, Mrs Eileen
 Gormie, Donald
 Graham, Thomas
 Grant, Bernie
 Griffiths, Ms Jane (*Reading E*)
 Griffiths, Nigel (*Edinburgh S*)
 Griffiths, Win (*Bridgend*)
 Grocott, Bruce
 Grogan, John
 Gunnell, John
 Hain, Peter
 Hall, Mike (*Weaver Vale*)
 Hall, Patrick (*Bedford*)
 Hamilton, Fabian (*Leeds NE*)
 Hancock, Mike
 Hanson, David
 Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
 Harris, Dr Evan
 Harvey, Nick
 Heal, Mrs Sylvia
 Heath, David (*Somerton*)
 Henderson, Doug (*Newcastle N*)
 Henderson, Ivan (*Harwich*)
 Hepburn, Stephen
 Heppell, John
 Hesford, Stephen
 Hewitt, Ms Patricia
 Hill, Keith
 Hinchliffe, David
 Hodge, Ms Margaret
 Hoey, Kate

Tellers for the Noes:
 Mr. David Clelland and
 Jane Kennedy.

Question accordingly negated.

Main Question put:—

The House divided: Ayes 421, Noes 151.

Division No. 4]

[10.42 pm

AYES

- Abbott, Ms Diane
 Adams, Mrs Irene (*Paisley N*)
 Ainger, Nick
 Ainsworth, Robert (*Cov'try NE*)
 Allan, Richard (*Sheffield Hallam*)
 Allen, Graham (*Nottingham N*)
 Anderson, Donald (*Swansea E*)
 Anderson, Ms Janet (*Ros'dale*)
 Armstrong, Ms Hilary
 Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
 Atherton, Ms Candy
 Atkins, Ms Charlotte
 Austin, John
 Baker, Norman
 Ballard, Mrs Jackie
 Banks, Tony
 Barnes, Harry
 Barron, Kevin
 Bayley, Hugh
 Beard, Nigel
 Begg, Ms Anne (*Aberd'n S*)
 Beith, Rt Hon A J
 Bell, Stuart (*Middlesbrough*)
 Benn, Rt Hon Tony
 Bennett, Andrew F
 Benton, Joe
 Bermingham, Gerald
 Berry, Roger
 Best, Harold
 Betts, Clive
 Blackman, Ms Elizabeth
 Blears, Ms Hazel
 Blizard, Robert
 Boateng, Paul

- Home Robertson, John
Hood, Jimmy
Hoon, Geoffrey
Hope, Philip
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Alan (*Newport E*)
Howarth, George (*Knowsley N*)
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley
(*Stretford & Urmston*)
Hughes, Kevin (*Doncaster N*)
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Brian
Illsley, Eric
Ingram, Adam
Jackson, Ms Glenda (*Hampstead*)
Jackson, Mrs Helen (*Hillsborough*)
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian (*Tamworth*)
Johnson, Alan (*Hull W*)
Johnson, Miss Melanie
(*Welwyn Hatfield*)
Jones, Barry (*Alyn & Deeside*)
Jones, Ms Fiona (*Newark*)
Jones, Helen (*Warrington N*)
Jones, Ms Jenny
(*Wolverhampton SW*)
Jones, Jon Owen (*Cardiff C*)
Jones, Dr Lynne (*Selly Oak*)
Jones, Martyn (*Chwyd S*)
Jones, Nigel (*Cheltenham*)
Jowell, Ms Tessa
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan (*Feltham*)
Keen, Mrs Ann (*Brentford*)
Keetch, Paul
Kelly, Ms Ruth
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Charles
(*Ross Skye & Inverness W*)
Khabra, Piana S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Miss Oona (*Bethnal Green*)
Kingham, Tessa
Kirkwood, Archy
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan (*Bury S*)
Lewis, Terry (*Worsley*)
Linton, Martin
Livingstone, Ken
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Tony (*Manchester C*)
Lock, David
Love, Andy
McAllion, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Stephen
McCafferty, Ms Christine
McDonagh, Ms Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Ms Shona
McKenna, Ms Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McLeish, Henry
MacLennan, Robert
McMaster, Gordon
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Ms Judy
Mandelson, Peter
Marek, Dr John
Marsden, Gordon (*Blackpool S*)
Marsden, Paul (*Shrewsbury*)
Marshall, David (*Shetleston*)
Marshall, Jim (*Leicester S*)
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meacher, Michael
Meale, Alan
Michael, Alun
Michie, Mrs Ray (*Argyll Bute*)
Milburn, Alan
Miller, Andrew
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moore, Michael
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie (*Cardiff N*)
Morgan, Rhodri (*Cardiff W*)
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Ms Estelle (*B'ham Yardley*)
Mountford, Ms Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Dennis (*Wansbeck*)
Murphy, Jim (*Eastwood*)
Murphy, Paul (*Torfaen*)
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Mike (*N Warks*)
O'Brien, William (*Normanton*)
O'Hara, Edward
Olner, Bill
Opik, Lembit
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Mrs Sandra
Palmer, Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget (*Lewisham E*)
Prentice, Gordon (*Pendle*)
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Ms Joyce (*Gateshead E*)
Quinn, Lawrie (*Scarborough*)
Radice, Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew (*Loughborough*)
Rendel, David
Robinson, Geoffrey (*Cov'try NW*)
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie (*Dundee W*)
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Ms Joan
Russell, Ms Christine (*Chester*)
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Sanders, Adrian
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Philip
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Shipley, Ms Debra
Short, Rt Hon Clare
Simpson, Alan (*Nottingham S*)
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Andrew (*Oxford E*)
Smith, Ms Angela (*Basildon*)
Smith, Rt Hon Chris (*Islington S*)
Smith, Ms Jacqui (*Redditch*)
Smith, John (*Glamorgan*)
Smith, Llew (*Blaenau Gwent*)
Smith, Sir Robert (*W Ab'd'ns*)
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David (*Inverness E*)
Stewart, Ian (*Eccles*)
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Stott, Roger
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Mrs Gisela (*Edgbaston*)
Stunell, Andrew
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Ainsworth, Peter (*E Surrey*)
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, James
Atkinson, David (*Bour'mth E*)
Atkinson, Peter (*Hexham*)
Baldry, Tony
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter (*Worthing W*)
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian (*S Dorset*)
Burns, Simon
Butterfill, John
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney
(*Chipping Barnet*)
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann
(*Dewsbury*)
Taylor, Ms Dari (*Stockton S*)
Taylor, David (*NW Leics*)
Taylor, Matthew
(*Truro & St Austell*)
Thomas, Gareth (*Chwyd W*)
Thomas, Gareth R (*Harrow W*)
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis (*Wolverhampton SE*)
Turner, Desmond (*Kemptown*)
Turner, Dr George (*NW Norfolk*)
Twigg, Derek (*Halton*)
Twigg, Stephen (*Enfield*)
Tyler, Paul
Vaz, Keith
Vis, Rudolf
Wallace, James
Walley, Ms Joan
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
Webb, Steven
Whitehead, Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan
(*Swansea W*)
Williams, Mrs Betty (*Conwy*)
Willis, Phil
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie (*Doncaster C*)
Wise, Audrey
Wood, Mike
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Dr Tony (*Cannock*)
Wright, Tony (*Gl Yarmouth*)
Wyatt, Derek
Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. David Clelland and
Jane Kennedy.

NOES

- Clark, Dr Michael (*Rayleigh*)
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth
(*Rushcliffe*)
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Colvin, Michael
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davis, Rt Hon David (*Haltemprice*)
Davies, Quentin
(*Grantham & Stamford*)
Day, Stephen
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Flight, Howard
Forth, Eric
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher

Gale, Roger
 Garnier, Edward
 Gibb, Nick
 Gill, Christopher
 Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
 Goodlad, Rt Hon Alastair
 Gorman, Mrs Teresa
 Gray, James
 Green, Damian
 Greenway, John
 Grieve, Dominic
 Gummer, Rt Hon John
 Hague, Rt Hon William
 Hammond, Philip
 Hawkins, Nick
 Hayes, John
 Heald, Oliver
 Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
 Heseltine, Rt Hon Michael
 Horam, John
 Howard, Rt Hon Michael
 Howarth, Gerald (Aldershot)
 Hunter, Andrew
 Jack, Rt Hon Michael
 Jackson, Robert (Wantage)
 Jenkin, Bernard (N Essex)
 Johnson Smith,
 Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
 Key, Robert
 King, Rt Hon Tom (Bridgwater)
 Kirkbride, Miss Julie
 Laing, Mrs Eleanor
 Lansley, Andrew
 Leigh, Edward
 Letwin, Oliver
 Lewis, Dr Julian (New Forest E)
 Lidington, David
 Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
 Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter (Fareham)
 Loughton, Tim
 Luff, Peter
 Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
 MacGregor, Rt Hon John
 McIntosh, Miss Anne
 MacKay, Andrew
 Maclean, Rt Hon David
 McLoughlin, Patrick
 Madel, Sir David
 Major, Rt Hon John
 Malins, Humfrey
 Maples, John
 Mates, Michael
 Mawhinney, Rt Hon Dr Brian
 May, Mrs Theresa

Merchant, Piers
 Moss, Malcolm
 Nichols, Patrick
 Norman, Archie
 Page, Richard
 Paice, James
 Paterson, Owen
 Pickles, Eric
 Prior, David
 Redwood, Rt Hon John
 Robathan, Andrew
 Robertson, Laurence (Tewk'bury)
 Roe, Mrs Marion (Bloxbourne)
 Rowe, Andrew (Faversham)
 Ruffley, David
 St Aubyn, Nick
 Sayeed, Jonathan
 Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
 Simpson, Keith (Mid-Norfolk)
 Soames, Nicholas
 Spelman, Mrs Caroline
 Spicer, Sir Michael
 Spring, Richard
 Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
 Steen, Anthony
 Streetter, Gary
 Swayne, Desmond
 Syms, Robert
 Tapsell, Sir Peter
 Taylor, Ian (Esher & Walton)
 Taylor, John M (Solihull)
 Temple-Morris, Peter
 Townend, John
 Tredinnick, David
 Trend, Michael
 Tyrie, Andrew
 Viggers, Peter
 Walter, Robert
 Wardle, Charles
 Waterson, Nigel
 Whitney, Sir Raymond
 Whittingdale, John
 Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
 Wilkinson, John
 Willetts, David
 Wilshire, David
 Winterton, Nicholas (Macclesfield)
 Woodward, Shaun
 Yeo, Tim
 Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
 Mr. Bowen Wells and
 Mr. Richard Ottaway.

Resolved,

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, as follows:—

Most Gracious Sovereign,

We, Your Majesty's most dutiful and loyal subjects, the Commons of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, in Parliament assembled, beg leave to offer our humble thanks to Your Majesty for the Gracious Speech which Your Majesty has addressed to both Houses of Parliament.

Sir Peter Emery: On a point of order, Madam Speaker. I refer you to paragraph 9(3) of the new Standing Orders, which states:

"At ten o'clock on Mondays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays, the proceedings on any business then under consideration"—

there follow a number of exceptions which do not apply in this case—

"shall lapse."

Has the interpretation of that Standing Order been altered by your ruling of just over an hour ago? If it has not, perhaps you would remind the Government Chief Whip and those in his office to be a little more alert, so that the Deputy Prime Minister and other Ministers do not overrun their time again.

Madam Speaker: I am obliged to the right hon. Gentleman. Technically, he is quite right. The Deputy Prime Minister overran by about five seconds, but in this early stage of a new Parliament, I was prepared to exercise a little latitude. Therefore, the overrun is my fault. I shall not allow that to happen in future, and I know that the Whips in all parties will follow the rules with complete precision.

I am delighted that the right hon. Gentleman has spelt out the rules, so that the Whips may pay attention to them. I am sure that the House will understand the position and will make itself aware of the rule about which the right hon. Gentleman has reminded us.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Industry (Dunstable)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—[Mr. Robert Ainsworth.]

11.2 pm

Sir David Madel (South-West Bedfordshire): I am grateful for this debate, and I welcome to the Front Bench for the first time the Under-Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Mrs. Roche). I congratulate the hon. Lady on her appointment.

The object of the debate is to put to the House the industrial situation in Dunstable, and to explain why help is needed. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order. Perhaps hon. Members would leave the Chamber quietly while an hon. Member is addressing the House.

Sir David Madel: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

It is 21 years since an earlier Labour Government helped us in Dunstable by the rescue of Chrysler Trucks. The late Harold Lever and the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman), who was then Minister of State, Department of Trade and Industry, came in with a rescue package to save, for a time, 3,500 jobs in Dunstable.

We have moved a long way from then. The economy in south Bedfordshire has somewhat improved, and local unemployment rates have dropped. However, there are still three major causes of concern in the Dunstable and Houghton Regis area, which is why I sought this Adjournment debate tonight. Those are, first, the decline of traditional industries; secondly, the impact of traffic congestion on local industrial performance; and, thirdly, the future of the site of AWD Bedford Trucks, which, alas, no longer makes trucks.

On the decline of traditional industries, we were struck yet another blow during the election campaign in the middle of April, when the De La Rue printing company, with no warning whatever, announced that it was pulling out of Dunstable, with a loss of 400 jobs. That follows the closure of Cross Paperware last year, and of several other companies in the past few years. Thus, yet another major traditional Dunstable industry—printing—will go.

Another local industry that has disappeared in the past few years is the truck manufacturing industry. Dunstable once had two truck manufacturers: the world-famous Bedford Trucks, and Renault Trucks. After years of decline, a recession and the refusal by the Foreign Office in the previous Conservative Government to allow an export licence for AWD Bedford to sell civilian lorries to Libya—the Department of Trade and Industry and my then right hon. Friend, Mr. Richard Needham, wanted to grant an export licence, but the Foreign Office blocked it—the company collapsed.

Automotive components manufacturing remains a major local employer, providing some 3,000 jobs in the constituency, but those jobs are constantly challenged as manufacturers face increased competition caused by globalisation. Manufacturers in my constituency are not entitled to major grants under the current Government and European grant regimes. Indeed, those regimes discriminate against companies in the locality.

When major international companies start to reconsider their future investment strategy, grants can tempt investment away from our area. TRW Cam Gears recently invested in south Wales rather than Dunstable, for that very reason. At that time, the unemployment rate in south Wales was lower than in the Dunstable-Luton conurbation, although the latter is not recognised officially, because of the travel-to-work area problem.

Traffic congestion in Dunstable continues to worsen. The Bedfordshire chamber of commerce recently complained that its members in the Dunstable-Luton conurbation find it increasingly difficult to service customers west of Dunstable because of congestion. The main local industry—automotive components manufacturing—now uses a “just-in-time” system of product delivery. Local congestion threatens that system and the local jobs dependent on it.

Dunstable and Houghton Regis therefore need urgent new investment in the local road network. We still do not know the outcome of the A5 bypass conference held in Dunstable in the autumn. I do not criticise the Labour Government for that; I believe that they will soon be able to release the conference’s conclusions. At that conference, representative after representative from industry in Dunstable warned of the danger of not solving our congestion problems. No case can be made for spending money and widening the M1 in Bedfordshire before something is done about Dunstable and Houghton Regis.

On infrastructure and public and private transport, I note the Labour Government’s commitment to greater investment in and enthusiasm for the railways. I am glad to say that a parish poll in Dunstable last week—confined to Dunstable citizens—produced an 80 per cent. vote in favour of reopening our rail link.

The congestion problem was neatly summed up in a short letter in last week’s *Dunstable Gazette*. It was headed:

“Back the bypass to attract new business.”

The letter states:

“The local and national elections have come at a very opportune time for those living and working in Dunstable. Tragically (particularly for those employed there and their families) De La Rue”—

which, as I have mentioned, is going, with 400 job losses—

“yet another major employer, has left the town. There are few enough job opportunities locally and with the present communications (road and rail!) poor to say the least, it is more likely that further companies will leave rather than come to Dunstable. I fervently hope that those who have ended up representing the area will make it their mission to get us a bypass.”

The writer of that letter can have no doubt about my commitment to the bypass. It is a very important matter, and I cannot stress too strongly how important it is for industrial reasons.

The third major concern is the future of the AWD Bedford Trucks site. We have made progress. English Partnerships gave us a grant of £1 million, and without it we would not have Arensons, which is an office manufacturing equipment company. It is on site and building, and it goes into production in the autumn. It will be hugely welcomed, and will provide about 600 jobs for the town.

The Government have offered a KONVER grant of £750,000 towards the cost of redeveloping the AWD site. We obviously want to be able to use that money flexibly

[Sir David Madel]

within the development process to ensure that we get that industrial production, even if the development process is not exactly the same as originally envisaged in the grant application. In other words, we need maximum flexibility.

It is pertinent to ask the Government to tell us soon how English Partnerships will fit in with the regional development agencies that were proposed in the Queen's Speech. We await the White Paper with interest. I have no hesitation in saying that English Partnerships is popular in Dunstable. It has given us nearly £1 million and is well on the industrial map, and we greatly appreciate what it has done.

What can we do to take our industry forward and get our manufacturing employment back? We are all hoping that Vauxhall will launch the new Corsa in 1998-99 at the Luton plant. We hope that that will be confirmed. There would then be two cars being produced in Luton—the Vectra and the Corsa—employing hundreds from Dunstable and Houghton Regis. In every street in those two towns in my constituency, somebody knows somebody who works at Vauxhall at Luton. I hope that it will be possible for the Government to give Vauxhall some launch aid to get the Corsa into production.

If we get that, I will appeal to General Motors, as I have before, to give priority to former AWD Bedford Trucks workers when it is seeking new employees. We had a breakthrough last year with the Vauxhall-Renault van deal, which will bring 900 new jobs. I appealed to General Motors then to look first to Dunstable and Houghton Regis to try to take on former Bedford Trucks workers. If we can get the Corsa, I will ask General Motors to do that again.

We need assisted area status and a change in the grants and the European grants to give us a manufacturing boost. The Under-Secretary of State who is to reply to the debate is the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green. In the Houghton Regis and Dunstable area, there are hundreds and hundreds of people who were moved out of London as part of the overspill programme, and probably some families came from Hornsey and Wood Green.

When those Londoners were moved out of London, they were moved because there were houses and there were jobs in our area. We did not operate a programme to move people out of London only for them to have to return to London to work. Therefore, houses and jobs were inextricably intertwined. What we have not yet got right is the jobs. My area has plenty of houses and housing developments, and there will be more to come, but we have neither manufacturing jobs nor the right infrastructure—road or rail—to support us.

I badgered the previous Government about those issues, and I shall, politely and gently, ask the brand new Labour Government, as they get their feet under the table, to see whether we cannot redraw the travel-to-work area boundaries to help us in the Dunstable and Houghton Regis area.

This month, in May, we saw the retirement of the former mayor of Dunstable, Councillor Reg Fossey. In his two years in office, he, with his wife Joan, gave great service to Dunstable, which has been hugely appreciated by everyone in the town. In his mayoralty, however, we have, as I said earlier in my speech, suffered some severe industrial setbacks, and we have seen shops close. Reg

Fossey, who has always been optimistic, has always urged the people of Dunstable to keep smiling, and Dunstable is trying its very best to keep smiling. We need help, however, to rebuild our manufacturing and a secure employment base.

As I said earlier, a previous Labour Government helped us, in 1976. It is early days for the new Government, but I appeal to Ministers to help us to rebuild a strong manufacturing employment base. Our area has everything going for it for manufacturers, such as good labour relations, which we have always had. With some public money spent on better roads and rail, our area would be hugely helped. We have a history of industrial stability and good will at the workplace.

I hope that the Government can give us not so much a handout as a hand up, so that we can return to the manufacturing orbit. I hope that they will be able to do that soon.

11.17 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (Mrs. Barbara Roche): I have listened with great interest to the speech of the hon. Member for South-West Bedfordshire (Sir D. Madel), and I congratulate him on securing this debate and on raising so many valuable points. I am also grateful for his kind words of welcome, and for the opportunity he has given me to outline some of the Government's plans to improve industry not only in the Dunstable area but across the United Kingdom.

To improve the competitiveness of British industry, we favour a collaborative approach, which builds on already existing partnerships. I am pleased that local and regional partners are actively working to regenerate the Luton-Dunstable area through a variety of measures, which I am sure are well known to the hon. Gentleman, who takes a very keen and detailed interest in such matters. I should particularly like to mention Bedfordshire county council, South Bedfordshire district council, Luton council, Bedfordshire training and enterprise council, English Partnerships—which he mentioned—and the Government office for eastern region.

Dunstable is typical of many regions in the UK that have, over the past two or three decades, undergone major structural change. In the 1970s, the economy was dominated by large manufacturing industry, and, in particular, by the automotive industry. In the 1980s, as the hon. Gentleman said, the area was hit by the closure of both the Bedford and Renault truck operations. The rundown of that sector has been compounded by the departure of other large businesses, such as Marks and Spencer distribution centre and Cross Paperware, and now by the imminent departure of Thomas De La Rue.

The hon. Member rightly expressed his concerns, which I completely understand, over the future of De La Rue. I understand that it is likely to close in July as part of a major restructuring of the group's security printing business. I know that the Bedfordshire TEC is in touch with De La Rue about the closure of its Dunstable plant, and has received assurances that, when the company puts proposals for redundancy to its employees this week, it will be seeking to identify individuals who are "willing and suitable to transfer to High Wycombe".

Both the TEC and the Employment Service have now declared this to be a large-scale redundancy. The effect is to allow access to special assistance, which I hope will enable the people who lose their jobs to find new ones.

Local and regional organisations are already working hard to regenerate the area. I know that the Luton-Dunstable partnership is having a major impact with a £40 million regeneration programme which is expected to result in 4,000 jobs being created or safeguarded. The single regeneration budget is contributing £9.2 million, and that money has attracted additional funding from the private, voluntary and public sectors.

The partnership, which is private sector led, has already developed integrated regeneration schemes which provide employment and training, as well as improving the competitiveness of local companies. The partnership activities are also directed towards clearing and developing sites and improving transportation and town centres—issues that have been clearly identified by the hon. Gentleman.

Since the partnership started in 1995, the benefits have already become clear. More than 4,000 schoolchildren have been involved in the compact programme, which aims to create clubs in every secondary school to introduce children in our schools to the world of work. The programme in the Luton-Dunstable area also aims to improve the educational attainment of young people and to reduce truancy and vandalism. The partnership has already helped to establish 20 new businesses and nearly 150 people have found work. More than 11,000 people have been involved in community safety projects, and more than 100 voluntary organisations have been supported.

Other extremely valuable projects are also coming on stream. They include a technology innovation centre, which is being developed to support new high-tech companies.

The hon. Gentleman spoke eloquently of the skills of the local work force and the potential of the Dunstable area. I share his view. Certainly, the new Labour Government will move quickly to support our high-tech firms, which are essential if the Dunstable area and Britain are to succeed and become increasingly competitive.

Another area that I should like to touch on is inward investment. Until now, efforts to attract new investment to Bedfordshire and the other counties of the eastern region have been hampered because the region has not had its own inward investment agency. However, in April of this year the East of England Investment Agency was established. The agency is based on a strong partnership between the public and private sectors, and will be supported in its first year by a grant from the DTI of just over half a million pounds; there is also a significant contribution from the local authorities, TECs and the private sector.

The East of England Investment Agency will promote and develop the east of England as a world-class inward investment location very much along the lines mentioned by the hon. Gentleman—with all the structures in place in terms of the work force and commitment from the local agencies. The agency will be concerned with both attracting new investment and retaining existing investment by providing an after-care service.

The hon. Member mentioned the part that the automotive industry had traditionally played in the local economy. Although there have been closures, the industry continues to be a major employer in the area—notably at the Vauxhall plant in Luton and the neighbouring IBC

plant. However, the economy is becoming more diversified. Since 1991, the number of people employed by large companies in Luton and Dunstable has decreased substantially, while the number of people employed by smaller companies has increased.

The hon. Gentleman also mentioned the derelict land in the region. The greatest problem, as he rightly said, is the AWD site, formerly the Bedford Trucks plant. Not only is the site very large, but there are environmental hazards. A good start has been made on the expensive process of clearance and redevelopment, with the help of an £850,000 grant from English Partnerships. I was pleased to hear the hon. Gentleman's warm tribute to that.

I am delighted that President Office Furniture is moving to a new headquarters and factory building on the AWD site this summer. In addition to 280 people already employed in the company who will be relocating to Dunstable, a further 220 will be recruited locally—that is good news for the area. A second phase already planned will add a further 50 jobs.

I also welcome the fact that plans are well advanced for regeneration of the rest of the site. A £1.5 million finance package is now being put together, including £750,000 from KONVER matched by an equal amount from other public and private sources. The successful redevelopment of the remainder of the AWD site will not only remove the eyesore of huge dilapidated buildings, but reduce the development pressures on green belt land around Luton and Dunstable. I am sure that that will be warmly welcomed by local people.

I am pleased that the Luton plant of IBC, in which Vauxhall is the major shareholder, has just been chosen as the manufacturing location for vans under the joint venture between General Motors and Renault. That will create 900 jobs in the Luton plant. My Department has developed a close and positive relationship with Vauxhall and its parent, General Motors. I am aware of Vauxhall's aspirations for its Luton plant to produce the Corsa in addition to the Vectra.

However, at this stage, the company has not put forward any specific proposals. My Department would be more than willing to discuss with Vauxhall whether there are any ways in which we can help. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will note that, and ensure that that message is conveyed back to local people.

Another key issue for the Luton-Dunstable economy is whether the automotive component manufacturers can rise to the challenge of global competition. Bedfordshire business link is leading a £500,000 business support project for automotive component manufacturers which covers Bedfordshire, Oxfordshire and Northamptonshire.

The project has the objective of raising standards to world-class levels. It covers small and medium-sized enterprises that supply components for racing car constructors and for the volume car market. The project will transfer best practice through focus groups, and will also provide carefully designed and targeted support through business link partnerships. I wish the project every success, and I shall follow its progress extremely closely.

The project is typical of the kind of high-quality support that I expect business links to give to promote our small and medium-sized enterprises, both in the Dunstable area and elsewhere in the United Kingdom. They deserve our great support, for this is the sector from which growth in this country will emerge.

[Mrs. Barbara Roche]

Over the next few months, I will be looking closely at all the activities business links are involved in, to ensure that Government support is targeted to best effect. In particular, I shall investigate the work that can be done to improve local supply chains and develop the regional supply network. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will also want to follow these matters, as they could be of great use in his own area.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the planning conference that was held in October last year to consider the A5 Dunstable bypass and other local transport issues. I know that he contributed personally to the debate, which brought together a wide range of local interests. I understand that the report of the conference will shortly be considered by Ministers in the Department of Transport.

I understand that the local authorities for Luton-Dunstable are jointly preparing a revised transport package bid for the transport policies and planning round in July. I am advised that the package is likely to include proposals for a public transport corridor, Translink, using the redundant railway line between Dunstable and Luton, and will also propose extending the corridor to Luton airport. I am confident that my colleagues in the Department of Transport will give those proposals urgent and careful attention, but a realistic solution to problems of accessibility and traffic congestion in Dunstable depends on local interests reaching consensus on the best way to proceed.

I know that the hon. Gentleman is already aware of the good news regarding the scheme to build a new station on the Thameslink line at Luton airport. The Department of Transport has allocated £2.8 million of the £12 million available locally.

Obviously, the transport issue is of major concern to the area, and I am sure that it will receive great consideration by my ministerial colleagues, but the hon. Gentleman will also want to be involved in that area very closely indeed.

The Government office for eastern region will continue to work with local and regional partners to regenerate the Luton-Dunstable area, and will ensure that the experiences and concerns of local people are taken into account when decisions are taken on national policy matters.

The Government are determined to do everything possible to help local people to tackle those problems, by introducing specific local initiatives and national policies.

I end where I began, by congratulating the hon. Gentleman on obtaining this debate so early in the new Parliament; by assuring him that I shall continue to take a very close interest in these matters; and by assuring him that we shall continue our discussions with him and others to ensure that the people of Dunstable know that their industry and their local situation are of deep concern to the Government.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at twenty-nine minutes to Twelve midnight.

House of Commons

Wednesday 21 May 1997

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER in the Chair]

Adjournment of the House

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—[Mr. Jamieson.]

9.34 am

Mr. Ross Cranston (Dudley, North): Madam Speaker, I congratulate you on your election.

In this my maiden speech, I pay a warm tribute to my predecessor, Dr. John Gilbert, who represented the Dudley, East seat for 27 years. He represented the people of Dudley conscientiously and, when I was campaigning, he was often mentioned by people who came up to me in the street and commended him for the help that he had given them. I congratulate him on his recent appointment as Minister of State and on his imminent appointment as a life peer.

I now also represent two wards that were represented by my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley, South (Mr. Pearson)—indeed my friend as well—and I pay tribute to him. At a national level, I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister. This country is fortunate in having such a bold, dynamic and visionary leader, and the extent of my party's victory turned on his leadership. It also turned on the efforts of many others, including my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister, with his robust good sense, his background in the Labour movement and his energy, and many ordinary members, including the members of the Labour party in my constituency. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons on her appointment. The House is fortunate that the initiative for its reform is in such good hands.

I have the honour to represent Dudley, North. It is a tremendous privilege to have been elected to serve the people of that part of the black country. The region is replete with history, which dates back to prehistoric times. Castle Hill and Wren's Nest contain a unique collection of prehistoric fossils and an application has been made for world heritage listing on that basis.

As you well know, Madam Speaker, the name "the black country" derives from the time of the industrial revolution. In the 19th century, the region was a powerhouse of economic activity. It is a history of a great people who take pride in their contribution to this country's modern development. Much of that 19th-century industry has gone, but my constituency can look forward to the new millennium with confidence under a Labour Government, who are prepared to provide support for local initiatives. The Castle Gate project is just one example. The site, designed for high-tech industries of the 21st century, will now go ahead.

We should not forget that the past 18 years have not been kind to many of my constituents. Older people have suffered in particular and unemployment, especially among young people, is far too high. I therefore welcome the Government's commitments to improve public services, the national health service and social housing, and, in particular, their undertakings on the training and employment of young people. The Labour party believes that services provided publicly, by the community, are a way of ameliorating inequality, which has been so accentuated in the past 18 years.

Before the House adjourns, I should like it to consider a number of matters. The first relates to the Government's policies to address crime. When I was campaigning during the election, I found that youth crime was of particular concern to many ordinary people. In some cases, they may misperceive the problem, but crime is an objective reality. In his recent pronouncements, my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has built on the well-accepted criminological truism that certainty is as important as severity in deterring crime. That is why fast-track punishment is important. Offenders have to be sure that they will be caught and punished quickly—it is as important as what happens afterwards.

Several years ago, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister coined the phrase "tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime". The causes are many. Government policies on employment generation for young people are linked to our crime prevention policies. People without hope, or a future, or who are alienated from society, are more likely to commit crime.

A number of points have struck me as I have sat in the Crown court as an assistant recorder, and now a recorder, for the past six years, although I hasten to add that my experience is limited. The first is the complexity of matters. The former Home Secretary traded in simplicities. He also rejected the findings of research, even research from his own Department. It is no wonder that those at the coal face of the criminal justice system—the judiciary, including the higher judiciary—have resoundingly rejected his approach.

Secondly, I was struck by the fact that so much crime is drug and alcohol related. A number of hon. Members have said the same and mentioned the irresponsibility of some parts of the drinks industry. I agree that something must be done.

A third point that has struck me is that many people who appear before me in the Crown court have not had a decent start in life. We see that in the pre-sentence reports. That certainly does not absolve them from responsibility for their acts but it means, as the Prime Minister has said, that we must tackle the causes as well as the manifestations of crime.

Before the House adjourns, I should also like it to consider the recent pronouncements of my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer. One announcement concerned the operational independence of the Bank of England. The main Opposition party has taken issue with that on the basis that the decision was taken without parliamentary debate or statement, but it is in the nature of such things that events move quickly. In fact, it was an astute move. It back-footed the markets and richly deserves the praise that it has won. It is consistent with international developments in the operation of monetary policy and it also puts us in a position to comply

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with the Maastricht treaty should we decide to be part of the European single currency. There will still be accountability through the Monetary Policy Committee and a more representative Court at the Bank. More important, the Government will continue to set the inflation target.

I was gratified to hear the Governor of the Bank of England say last week:

"What we are about is growth and employment, but we are about that in the medium and longer term. Low inflation with steady growth is what we are on about. An inflation target is not an end in itself but very much a means to an end."

I welcome that statement; it is precisely what my right hon. Friend the Chancellor is seeking to achieve.

I have been fortunate to serve on several International Monetary Fund missions to central banks in Asia and eastern European countries. I have to confess that sometimes the Governor's realistic appraisal of goals was rather lost in the concern for price stability. In countries with rampant inflation, price stability must be an overriding factor but, as the Governor has rightly said, and as the Chancellor has also made clear, the central goals must be growth and employment with stability, as the Chancellor has said, a platform to those ends.

I hope that before the House adjourns it will take into account the various matters that I have mentioned.

9.43 am

Dr. Evan Harris (Oxford, West and Abingdon): It is a pleasure and an honour to follow the eloquent and detailed maiden speech made by the hon. Member for Dudley, North (Mr. Cranston). I hope that my contribution will match his in eloquence and content.

It is a privilege to represent the beautiful constituency of Oxford, West and Abingdon. I am the first Liberal to sit for Oxford since a certain Mr. Frank Grey, who won in 1922 and 1923. On both occasions there was a two-party contest between the Liberals and Conservatives—a luxury that we can no longer enjoy. Unfortunately, Mr. Grey was unseated after an election petition, the charge—or at least the allegation—being that he tampered with the signals on the railway to prevent a train carrying Conservative voters from arriving from Oxford and disgorging its contents. It seems that 70 years later, the previous Government found an even more effective way to stop people going about their business on the railways through their privatisation programme.

In representing Oxford, I am also following the late Evan Luard who was latterly a member of the Social Democratic party, which I also joined. We therefore share not only a relatively rare first name, shared as far as I know in political circles only by the son of the new Prime Minister, but our political beliefs. He was followed by my immediate predecessor, the right hon. John Patten.

John Patten was considered a controversial Member of Parliament, yet he was and is well respected in the constituency for his courtesy to his political opponents and his constituents and for the effective and prompt way in which he dealt with constituency matters. Although I might not agree with much of what he said during the years that he served the constituency, I pay full tribute to his record as a constituency Member of Parliament and his record of standing up for what he believed in,

even though it might court controversy. I hope that in also making a stand on things that matter to me, I can follow in his footsteps.

Oxford, West and Abingdon has many claims to fame. Because of its old and beautiful university, it has perhaps more libraries than any other constituency, more chapels and, of course, more bars and pubs. Indeed, I served my political apprenticeship 10 years ago among those chapels, libraries and bars. That allows me to note now the colleges of Balliol, Brasenose, Corpus Christi, Christ Church, Exeter, Hertford, Jesus, Keble, Kellog, Lincoln, Linacre, Lady Margaret Hall, Mansfield, Magdalen, Manchester, Merton, New college, Oriel, the Queen's college, Regent's Park, St. Anne's, St. Antony's, St. Catherine's, St. Edmund Hall, St. Hilda's, St. Hugh's, St. John's, St. Peter's, Trinity, University, Wadham, which is my own fondly remembered alma mater, Wolfson and Worcester.

The risk in that recitation of the oft-travelled canvass trips is that I may have missed some out, but I must pay due respect to the voters of those colleges—first-time voters at that—who, in large numbers, decided to return a Liberal Democrat. Partly it was because they recognised the importance for the future of this country of investment in education, not only in school education from which many of them benefited in the state sector, as I did in Liverpool, but in higher education.

Before the House adjourns, it is important that we consider the future of higher education. The university sector is under great pressure with the unit of funding having been reduced serially since the expansion of numbers, which was welcomed by all, but which was significantly underfunded. The threat of the end of free education for a first degree, for young as well as adult learners, should be treated with grave concern.

Access to higher education is already restricted to those well enough off to ensure that they can get through their university days without descending into poverty or those perhaps able to take out loans contingent on the fact that they are entering professions for which the remuneration will be sufficient to pay off those loans. The concern is that we not only damage access for people from lower socio-economic backgrounds, such as people who went to my own comprehensive school in Liverpool, some of whom I know had to drop out of university education because of the cost, but close off access to higher education for those pursuing careers that are less well paid. In many cases, young graduates find that they cannot consider entering a career in the caring professions or in public service.

Hon. Members have expressed great concern about the recruitment levels of those entering the teaching or nursing profession, entry to which now usually requires a degree. Labour Members will be interested to know that, in my own profession, the starting salary for junior hospital doctors for out-of-hours work is around £3.50 an hour. They should be concerned that those who are treating, out of normal working hours, the sick and the most vulnerable in society are among the lowest-paid in the country.

I was proud to represent junior doctors in my trade union—the British Medical Association—not only in Oxford, West and Abingdon, but across the south-east. The BMA has pressed for due consideration of not only terms and conditions of employment but the work load

that has fallen upon those who are working in the acute hospital sector. I include in that sector the legion of managers who now work in the health service. When I started on the wards, one would never see a manager beyond the normal working day on the wards of my local hospitals, the Radcliffe infirmary or the Oxford Radcliffe hospital. Even managers, however, are now pressed into action, when patient waiting times become too great. Managers, rather than junior doctors, are working hard to find beds—which are often in short supply—in which to place patients until an appropriate management plan can be made.

Before the House adjourns, I hope that we resolve to tackle the problems of the acute hospital sector, for the benefit not only of patients—who are feeling the effects of the excess work load placed on those working in the profession and of shortened hospital stays—but of those working in the hospital sector, on whom the national health service, which is under great pressure, must rely. Those people are doing ever more overtime and working ever harder, for seemingly less and less reward.

It is a pleasure for me to represent not only my fellow trade unionists within the medical profession but all my constituents in Oxford, West and Abingdon. People in my constituency have an outlook that extends not only to their own city and country. My constituency is the home of the Oxfam charity, and its university is the home of several third-world organisations. They look beyond our shores to think of people who are less well off than ourselves.

During the general election campaign, I made a pledge—which I hope to implement—to ensure that, when considering how to redistribute our country's resources, we not only think of the people of these islands, but consider how we can ensure that the world in which we live can be a fitter place, in which resources are shared more fairly between the first world and those in less developed countries. If I have a part to play in achieving that goal, I shall have served my constituents proud.

It is an honour to have been elected to the House, and I hope to be able to raise all these issues in this Parliament.

9.52 am

Mr. Lindsay Hoyle (Chorley): I congratulate both you, Madam Speaker, and the President of the Council. I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley, North (Mr. Cranston) and the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris) on their maiden speeches. I hope that I can follow in the same, successful vein.

I pay tribute to Den Dover, the former hon. Member for Chorley, who represented the constituency for the past 18 years. He worked hard in the general election campaign, and one must always remember that he was a dedicated Member of Parliament. Before him, George Rodgers—a Labour Member—served Chorley well. From 1945 to 1969, Clifford Kenyon—a renowned name in the Chamber—served Chorley as one of the greatest ever Members of Parliament. His knowledge of farming was unquestionably renowned.

I should also like to thank my father, Doug Hoyle. He was a Member from 1974 to 1979, representing the old Nelson and Colne constituency. He then went on to serve, from 1981 to 1987, as the hon. Member for Warrington, North, where my hon. Friend the Member for Weaver Vale (Mr. Hall) represented the adjoining constituency.

My father has since been elevated to the House of Lords. I wish him well, and I thank him for all the support that he has given me.

It is a privilege to represent Chorley, the town of my birth. Perhaps uniquely among hon. Members, I was born in my constituency, and I have always lived and worked in it. I am therefore very proud to have been elected to the House to represent my home town.

Chorley is an historical market town. It comprises more than 50,000 acres—from lowland, near Southport, to the west Pennine moors—and 23 parishes, and it has a population, which is rising, of 96,000. We had much manufacturing, from textiles to such famous companies as Leyland, Royal Ordnance and Horwich Locomotive Works. Although the latter was in Bolton, West, it still employed thousands of people from all over the area, including Chorley. Almost all those companies have now gone.

Royal Ordnance was most recently in the news as a dumping site for bovine spongiform encephalopathy-infected animal offal, thereby serving as a double symbol of Tory failure. The borough unemployment rate now averages 4 per cent.—which is very low—but it is low only because more than 50 per cent. of the working population travels outside Chorley to work, as most of our manufacturing has been destroyed.

Other areas have severe unemployment, which is sometimes 12 per cent. or higher. Recent job losses have included those at NORWEB, GPT, Perrite and John Willman. Well-known companies across the country are still shedding jobs, and that is the danger. I am confident that the Government will deal with the danger.

A recent survey in Chorley showed that more than half the job offers in our jobcentre were for part-time employment. The average weekly wage for those jobs was £103, and one job was advertised at £1 per hour. Such a situation is disgusting and unacceptable in a modern society. We will be a modern society, and we will redress that imbalance. A minimum wage is crucial to achieving our goals.

How personal and national economic security can be obtained under current economic circumstances is inconceivable, and I await the Government's establishment of a commission to examine a minimum wage. Some private utilities earn in a few seconds as much as some people earn in a lifetime, yet they refuse to contribute—as detailed in the Government's finance plans—to the effort to put young people back in work. Our Government have a mandate to achieve that goal.

I was chairman of Chorley borough council's economic development and tourism committee, and I helped to bring investment to Chorley, by working with businesses and showing them the attractions and benefits of what we have to offer.

The Royal Ordnance site, which is now essentially derelict, once employed 30,000 people. Now it offers a few dozen jobs. By maximising the site's potential, we are finally returning investment to our area. We are delighted that the Computer Science Corporation has chosen a redundant building on the site as its base, thereby creating 400—mainly highly skilled—jobs. Over the next four years, Latham, Crossley and Davies, a major Chorley accounting firm, plans to expand, thereby creating 200 new jobs. An extension is also planned to Ackhurst business park, which should create another 130 new jobs.

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Those developments were aided by the economic development unit, which plays an active, interventionist role in Chorley business. It does not tell business how to run itself—it works with business to create the economic conditions that business requires. Every week, we visited firms to talk and listen to them and to provide them with contacts with councillors and officers, with whom they could deal directly in the council. As the hon. Member for Chorley, I shall maintain those links and work hard for business and for the local authority. For many years, it has been a revelation in Chorley to have a public-private partnership—which is one basis of the Government's industrial strategy—instead of pitting one sector against another.

I also helped to found the Chorley partnership, to join businesses and community leaders in working together for the town's social and economic development.

Chorley has lacked support from central Government. To have a progressive Government who share our aims will give a major boost to my area. The creation of regional development agencies will be a massive improvement. Chorley's economic development unit dealt with 442 inquiries last year. Most people were seeking advice on sites, on property available in the locality and on potential sources of financial assistance. Little assistance has been available, however, because the previous Government did not believe in it. It is a crying shame that the previous Member of Parliament thought that assisted area status would do nothing for Chorley. I hope that we can redress the balance and put Chorley on a level playing field with neighbouring areas so that we can improve it for the benefit of the people who live there. My experience of Chorley's economic development unit has shown me that development support is exactly what business wants and needs. The creation of a regional development agency will meet that objective.

It is appropriate that Europe should be dealt with at the same time as the economy; they are inextricably linked—one cannot have one without the other. The previous Government did not believe in Europe, so we profited little from the support available while every other country in the European Union did. KONVER is available to areas such as Chorley, which has seen a rundown in its defence industry, yet because of the previous Government's lack of belief and interest, we received hardly any aid to which we were entitled.

What was more shocking was the fact that the rules that applied to parts of the midlands and the south-east were different from those applied to the north-west. There could be 50 per cent. funding in the south-east, but only 35 per cent. in the north-west. There is something tragically wrong about being able to divide the country so easily. If one was cynical, one would assume that it was a political decision.

KONVER money has always been important to us. In 1996, we put in for a £3 million grant from KONVER II—which was a continuation of the old peripheral areas programme—under the auspices of the Chorley business technology centre, to assist with an £8 million development scheme for part of a 1,000 acre site in Chorley which is contaminated, but which can be used for business. We received little support from the Government. The bid was scaled down to £1 million and then to

£500,000, concentrating exclusively on managed workshop facilities at the Chorley business technology centre. It will do little to regenerate the massive Royal Ordnance site, but if we get the money, we shall at least have some start-up units for new businesses.

It is pointless to be a member of the EU when so much of what is available from membership is going begging because the previous Government's ideology was opposed to its positive aspects. By maximising our return from the EU in terms of grants such as KONVER, we can invest in sites, such as the Royal Ordnance site, which have massive potential. Those sites are existing industrial areas that can be developed without damaging the environment or contributing to urban sprawl. That must be of benefit to everyone.

I am delighted that we now have a Government who are committed to getting the most out of the EU by working with their partners and taking all to which we are entitled. I shall lobby Ministers hard to ensure that Chorley's case is heard and to support the early creation of regional development agencies, which will do so much to improve the economic success of regions such as the north-west.

I hope that the Royal Ordnance site will become a flagship for the whole of the north-west. It must be one of the biggest brown-field sites in the UK. It will benefit the whole of the north-west, it is well placed between two major motorways and it has a railway line running through its centre. We have a great opportunity to save green fields and to create new jobs for the north-west as a whole.

10.3 am

Mr. David Amess (Southend, West): It is a great honour to follow three splendid maiden speeches. Together with my hon. Friends the Members for Mid-Sussex (Mr. Soames) and for East Surrey (Mr. Ainsworth), I find myself having to respond to all the maiden speeches although I am not able to speak twice on this occasion. I will, however, deal with the three maiden speeches that we have heard so far.

These occasions should be special for hon. Members who are speaking for the first time. As the House knows, maiden speeches are the only occasions on which Members are listened to without any interruptions. It is a great occasion when people who have worked hard to be returned to the House speak for the first time.

I greatly enjoyed the speech by the hon. Member for Dudley, North (Mr. Cranston). It is clear that he feels passionately about issues in his constituency and I am sure that his constituents will not be disappointed by his plans to raise matters on their behalf in the years ahead. I am sure that he and his supporters are proud of his efforts today.

We then heard the maiden speech of the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris). It was a most fluent speech and it is clear that the hon. Gentleman has great knowledge of many issues. I know that the whole House will look forward to hearing from him in the future.

I, too, pay tribute to the former Member of Parliament for Oxford, West and Abingdon—John Patten—and my hon. Friends and I greatly appreciated the tribute paid to him by the new hon. Member for that constituency.

The hon. Gentleman referred to John Patten as "controversial" although I am not sure what that means these days. I believe that John Patten came to the House because he believed in things: he was a conviction politician. Every Member of Parliament is entitled to express his or her views. John Patten is a great loss to this House. He added something to all our debates—*[Interruption.]* Some hon. Members may disagree, but I believe that he is a great loss to this House and I am delighted that he will still serve in the Palace, albeit in the other Chamber.

With regard to the splendid speech by the hon. Member for Chorley (Mr. Hoyle), the hon. Gentleman's father had not alerted me to the fact that his son would be following him to the House. I knew the hon. Gentleman's late mother, who would have been proud of him, and I am sure that his father is proud of his speech today. It is clear that the hon. Gentleman cares passionately about the area that he now represents. My hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey and I also greatly appreciated his tribute to our defeated colleague, Den Dover. Den was a friend of mine and in the 14 years during which we were together in the House I saw that he worked very hard on behalf of his constituents. He raised constituency issues on every possible occasion and I believe that he is a great loss to this House.

I praise the three splendid maiden speeches this morning. The Leader of the House may smile, but the tradition is that maiden speeches should be uncontroversial. I normally do not have a good word to say about either the Labour party or the Liberal Democrats, but on this occasion I will honour the tradition and will not comment in any shape or form on the points made in those maiden speeches. I wish the three hon. Members well and I wish every success to those who have still to make their maiden speeches.

I wish to raise a number of points. The first concerns all the nonsense about Myra Hindley. I hope that the media will not waste days on end arguing the merits of whether she should eventually be released into society. There are many more important issues about which our constituents are concerned. I hope that this issue will pass in a day because I would regret our spending a great deal of time on it.

Secondly, there was an impression that the Labour party campaign was to a certain extent financed by the trade unions. In the course of this Parliament we shall find out the truth of the matter. I am, however, very concerned about a newspaper that is being distributed. I shall not name the source of my information or the name of the company concerned, but within two weeks of the election a newspaper has been distributed among workers in a company which is a very large employer. The newspaper talks about "the workers' fight" and says that big business is backing Downing street. It refers to Labour's drive against the poor and goes on and on about how the Labour party has already sold the workers out. We can argue about the merits of that later, but it would be a great mistake for individuals in the work forces of some of our large employers to stir up trouble within two weeks of the election—they should compare the state of the British economy in 1997 with how it was in 1979—so I hope that we shall hear no more of that nonsense.

My third point concerns my constituency. I pay a warm tribute to the former Member of Parliament, now Lord Channon, who represented the constituency for nearly

four decades. I know him very well. Whatever anyone says about him, I discovered during the election campaign that even if he did not court great publicity he was highly regarded by his constituents. Like people in every other constituency, the people of Southend, West have every right to be represented by the Member of Parliament whom they choose. He was a splendid Member of Parliament and I am delighted that he will still be serving the country in the other House.

I want to raise some brief issues concerning the constituency. The first relates to houses in multiple occupation. In parts of Southend, West, particularly Westborough and Chalkwell, many large properties have been turned into houses in multiple occupation. Last year I served on the Standing Committee considering the Housing Bill, which gave local authorities the power to set up proper registers and to deal with matters relating to houses in multiple occupation sensibly so that licences are no longer handed out in the cavalier fashion in which they had been given in the past. During the election campaign, I found that some properties were not fit to be determined houses in multiple occupation. The situation has caused great upset to many neighbours.

Southend council has 18 Conservatives, 14 Liberal Democrats and seven Labour members. At least in the local elections there was a swing to the Conservative party. At first we were told that the Labour and Liberal Democrat members would work together, but the latest news is that the Labour party has apparently decided to pull out of the arrangement and will determine its stance on each matter as it comes up. Whoever is prepared to run Southend council, I hope that the Housing Act 1996 will be honoured and that there will be careful determination on houses in multiple occupation.

The next issue that I wish to raise relates to the cockle industry. I am honoured to represent Leigh-on-Sea and the cockle industry is important to my constituency. The fishermen played their part in the second world war, using their vessels to defend their country, and they are an important influence in the local community. The Leader of the House will not have time to deal with the matter in this debate, but I hope that she will ask her officials to find out what is going on.

Before the general election I met the then Minister with responsibility for fisheries, and we are particularly concerned about the Thames Estuary Cackle Fishery Order 1994. I am told that the Kent and Essex Sea Fisheries Committee is implementing the order, but honouring that legislation is causing great distress. The Leigh-on-Sea Shellfish Merchants Association has always recognised that the local fleet is more than capable of outfishing cockle stocks and it has always tried to co-operate with the KESFC on sensible measures to preserve the fishery. Since the order came into effect, however, the KESFC has increased the number of licence holders by granting licences to applicants with dubious track records—or even no track record at all—and the business of law-abiding cockle fishermen is being damaged. I hope that the Leader of the House will find time to get her officials to investigate that.

The penultimate issue that I wish to raise concerns schools. I do not want to start a row in the Chamber about education—I shall save that for another occasion—but in my area we have many grant-maintained schools and selective schools. As I understand it, the Labour party fought the election campaign on the express promise that

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if local residents wished to continue to have selective schools, their wish would be honoured. I also understood that the new Government would do nothing to damage grant-maintained schools or, more importantly, the education of children. I have already had one or two letters from head teachers. They do not wish to argue, but simply ask for clarification—I do not believe that we have yet had a debate on education—about what will happen to grant-maintained and selective schools in Essex.

My final point concerns private care homes. You are a fellow Essex Member of Parliament, Mr. Deputy Speaker. My constituency has nearly 100 private care homes. We can argue with the Labour party and the Liberal Democrats about the whys and wherefores of private care homes, but we have a crisis at the moment in Essex. I hope that the Leader of the House, through her officials, will be able to tell us what is happening about that issue.

We have a crisis of bed blocking and rapidly increasing numbers of elderly people. There are many people in local hospitals who should not be blocking beds there, and there are many empty beds in private care homes which would cost less than caring for those people in the public sector. More than 80 beds are blocked in Southend hospital. Essex county council is controlled not by the Conservative party, but by a Labour and Liberal Democrat coalition. We have a Labour Government as well, so for goodness' sake let us sort the matter out. Some 90 per cent. of those people in hospital are awaiting social services funding for long-term care or community care packages. Half of the surgical wards are blocked with medically fit people awaiting discharge.

Whatever the arguments about the whys and wherefores, the situation is not good enough for the relatives who love those people who are in hospital at the moment. This is not the time to argue about the political merits of the matter. Those people may not be with us for much longer. I am simply asking that the new Government get in touch with the Labour and Liberal Democrat parties on Essex county council and do their best to sort the matter out, because there is a crisis. When relatives get around to finding out what the doctor recommends, they eventually get what they want, but it is taking an awfully long time. Many have already come to my surgery saying, "Our relatives are getting on in years and may not have much longer; we want to ensure that they are treated properly." The problem of bed blocking should be addressed urgently.

Finally, I congratulate all those who have made maiden speeches today or whose maiden speeches we shall hear shortly.

10.18 am

Liz Blackman (Erewash): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley, North (Mr. Cranston), the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris) and my hon. Friend the Member for Chorley (Mr. Hoyle) on their fine maiden speeches—they have made my job all the more difficult. I also thank the hon. Member for Southend, West (Mr. Amess) for his kind remarks.

It is a great privilege to make my maiden speech at this early stage and I am delighted to be here as the first Labour Member of Parliament for Erewash. I hope that the electorate's new practice of returning Labour Members will continue for many years to come.

I take this opportunity to pay tribute to my predecessor, Angela Knight, who represented Erewash from 1992 until this year. She was an extremely doughty campaigner who worked with commitment and enthusiasm to serve local people. During her last two years in the House she was a Treasury Minister. I wish her well.

In the short time that I have been attending Parliament, the two most frequent questions that I have been asked are, "What constituency do you represent?" and, when I reply, "Erewash," the inevitable supplementary is, "And where exactly is that?"

Erewash is in south-east Derbyshire. It lies between the cities of Derby and Nottingham. At either end of the constituency are the principal towns of Long Eaton and Ilkeston. In between, there are several villages and some very pretty countryside. The economic base of the area was founded on traditional industries—notably mining, heavy engineering and lace-making. Those industries have contracted over the years and the necklace of 12 coal pits which surrounded Ilkeston is no more.

Erewash was therefore a suitable case for widespread industrial inertia, but people have not permitted that to happen and there is extraordinary diversity in the local economy. Light engineering and textiles—including lace—are still major industries, but they operate at the cutting edge of modern technology. Furniture-making, information technology, service and distribution industries are all to be found there.

Stanton Ironworks is an excellent example of an industry that has moved with the times. It has a proud heritage going back more than 200 years, yet today it is Britain's largest manufacturer of ductile iron pipelines. I understand that Yorkshire Water placed a bulk order with the company last summer and I suspect that several other water companies will become familiar with its range of products in the coming months.

The wider site has been subject to reclamation and offers considerable potential, with improved rail and motorway access—a development that I support.

Many successful local firms export widely in Europe and welcome the Government's intention to complete the single market and to be at the heart of Europe arguing in the best interests of British jobs and business. They agree with Adair Turner that our constructive membership of the European Union is vital to their well-being.

I pay tribute to the local partnership, which is an exceptional example of its kind. It has co-ordinated many effective initiatives by pulling together the public, private and voluntary sectors and maximising local resources. Its current project—Erewash learning community—puts learning at the heart of local economic development policy. Recently, it came close to winning the prestigious *Local Government Chronicle* award for the business partnership of the year.

There are, however, factors in play which have not supported local prosperity. They include the boom-bust climate of the past few years, red tape, late payment, lack of investment, poor work standards, low pay and skills, and long-term youth unemployment. I am pleased to support a Government who find those problems unacceptable and are committed to their improvement through forthcoming domestic legislation and by signing up to the social chapter.

I particularly welcome the commitment in the Gracious Speech to education as the Government's first priority. Having taught for nigh on 25 years, I know that education,

like no other process, develops high self-esteem and a sense of empowerment that allows the learner to play a full part in society. I applaud the raft of Government proposals to raise the quality of education for all our children and stress the importance of consultation in that process. Teachers are desperate for a constructive dialogue and I take the view that to listen first is a strength and not a weakness and leads to better decisions.

An increasing number of disaffected pupils attend our schools and I had the responsibility for working with some of them. Teachers need support to meet that challenge, not only for the sake of those children, but for those who are more predisposed to learning and for society at large. I also pay tribute to the many excellent schools and teachers in my constituency who do well by their pupils despite grappling with large class sizes and crumbling surroundings.

When I was on a public platform during the recent election campaign, I was asked by a local councillor to define poverty. He had written down the figure that he wanted to use to challenge my anticipated response. In my definition, I talked about the inability to take advantage of opportunities to make progress and a sense of hopelessness. His face went blank as it became apparent that those concepts were completely beyond his understanding.

Good skills, a decent job and the ability to plan for the future are shared goals. They allow people to feel part of society and play a part in it. Achieving sustained economic prosperity built on the proposals outlined in the Gracious Speech will sow the seedcorn for an inclusive society. I support the Government's proposals because they will allow our country and its people to prosper in the widest sense of the word and I look forward to playing a small part in delivering a programme that I know will benefit the people of Erewash.

10.25 am

Mr. Andrew Stunell (Hazel Grove): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak today. It is a privilege to follow the hon. Member for Erewash (Liz Blackman). I understand her difficulty in constantly having to explain where her constituency is. When I explain that Hazel Grove is in Stockport, people say, "Yes, I went there once for a holiday, but the sea is rather a long way away, isn't it?" I then have to explain that it is not in Southport but in Stockport, so I share the hon. Lady's problem.

It is a privilege to represent the constituency of Hazel Grove, which stretches from the centre of Stockport to the boundary of the Peak District national park. It has a number of small communities which were founded on water power and then on coal power. Some people are surprised to learn that until recently it also had a major steel works. The area has had to undergo a sometimes painful transformation from a series of small industrial towns to a commuter district for Greater Manchester.

Paradoxically, although my constituency includes a number of small towns and is called Hazel Grove, it does not include half of Hazel Grove. It contains Marple, Marple Bridge, Romiley, Woodley, Bredbury and part of Offerton, but only a small part of Hazel Grove, including the railway station. I therefore have the problem that not only do people outside the constituency not know where the Hazel Grove constituency is, but people in Hazel Grove do not know where it is either. They are all united, however, by their support for high-quality education.

Stockport borough council, on which I am privileged to serve, has a deservedly high reputation and is high in the league table of examination results at primary and secondary school level. One of the issues that I shall be putting to the House is that Stockport should receive extra funding for education and be the subject of a review by the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions in due course.

Hazel Grove is a commuter area, so a great deal of attention is focused on the problems of travel, public transport, road transport and rail links. Some of us have been campaigning for additional rail links to complete the rail network. I intend to focus on road schemes, the problems of public transport and the need to balance more effectively central Government investment in transport. Commuter areas also face environmental problems caused by air pollution, vibration and traffic noise. My constituency has one of the first fully automated air quality monitoring systems in the United Kingdom on the busy urban A6 that passes through Hazel Grove. The results of that monitoring, which have now been available for some six months, show scientifically what my constituents have known intuitively for some time—that air quality in the area is well below the standards set both by the United Kingdom and by the European Union.

My constituents also have concerns about the national health service. We have problems with the dermatology unit, on which I have been able to work with the hon. Member for Stockport (Ms Coffey). There is a shortage of intensive care beds. Hon. Members may remember the tragic case of Nick Geldard, a young boy for whom an intensive care bed could not be found in the whole of Greater Manchester. He was driven by ambulance to Leeds, some 52 miles away, where he was declared dead on arrival.

I was interested to hear what the hon. Member for Southend, West (Mr. Amess) had to say about blocked hospital beds. I am happy to report that the issue does not face us in Stockport at the moment. However, we should bear in mind that our social services department has had to take cuts of £4 million in this financial year and that one of the predicted outcomes of that was an increase in bed blocking simply because assessment procedures could not be carried out in time. Those cuts were brought about not because of the Liberal Democrat-led administration, nor as a result of the votes of the Labour opposition, and certainly not because of the votes of the two remaining Conservative councillors, but due to the reduction in central Government funding for social services in Stockport—a matter that I shall certainly wish to bring before the House in due course.

In making his maiden speech, the hon. Member for Chorley (Mr. Hoyle) referred to development agencies and opportunities to boost employment. That is certainly a concern, and one that I shall wish to see supported. It is a matter of regret to me, however, that we have only a development agency and that there has not been a real transfer of power and decision making to democratically elected representatives in the north-west, which is what we believe is necessary.

I have outlined briefly some of the key concerns of the constituents who have sent me to the House to represent them: education, the problems of the NHS, and issues relating to public transport and employment. I hope that the House will not mind my mentioning briefly—so that the Leader of the House can hear—one of my concerns.

[Mr. Andrew Stunell]

Having entered the House as one of a greatly enlarged number of Liberal Democrat Members of Parliament—in fact, more than 50 per cent. of the Liberal Democrat Members are new to the House in this Session—I should like to mention briefly one or two of the difficulties encountered by new hon. Members on both sides of the House in seeking to represent our constituents effectively.

I am happy to report that I now have a desk and an office, but I am not so happy to report that I cannot have a telephone for another week or 10 days. That is just one aspect of the way in which, in considering not just the impact of a new Government and a new Parliament but the effectiveness of democratically elected representatives entering the House, we can in future take more care and put in more preparation to ensure that Members are able to take up their duties promptly and effectively.

In representing Hazel Grove, I have the privilege of following two very distinguished predecessors. Dr. Michael Winstanley, a Liberal, represented the constituency briefly in 1974. He later became Lord Winstanley, and sadly died last year. From October 1974 onwards, the constituency was represented by Sir Tom Arnold, who gave twenty-two and a half years' service to the House. Courtesy of the Library, I discovered what he said in his maiden speech during a debate on the European Community in April 1975. He made a very strongly pro-European speech. Those who remember his later days, supporting an alternative Conservative leadership bid last summer, may be a little surprised to hear that. Things change—the teller for the Ayes at the end of that debate was Madam Speaker herself, while one of the more prominent Noes going through the Lobby was the present Deputy Prime Minister. We must therefore recognise that, in politics, things change over time.

Sadly, Sir Tom has been very seriously unwell over the past year and had to stand down before the election. It is a privilege to represent Hazel Grove. I hope very much to follow in the tracks of my two distinguished predecessors. I hope that I can show the care, compassion and persistence of Michael Winstanley and repeat the tenacity and length of service of Sir Tom.

10.35 am

Mr. Harry Barnes (North-East Derbyshire): It is a pleasure to speak in a debate during which there have been so many impressive maiden speeches. The hon. Member for Southend, West (Mr. Amess) has already dealt with the maiden speeches by my hon. Friends the Members for Dudley, North (Mr. Cranston) and for Chorley (Mr. Hoyle) and of the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris). I associate myself with the remarks that he made about those speeches, which were all very impressive. I should like to refer to the two fine maiden speeches made subsequently.

The hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr. Stunell) represents an area not too far away from North-East Derbyshire. He mentioned that the Peak district is on the boundaries of his constituency. The Peak district extends a short distance into north-east Derbyshire, too. It is a beautiful area in which we both have considerable interest. He stressed environmental concerns. The environment in the area is very attractive, yet he identified environmental problems in his constituency, as I certainly

do in mine. Although I was politically active in my constituency when I was first a candidate and then its Member of Parliament, I was surprised to discover the depth of environmental problems that were impressed on me. I have always played a very active role in such matters, so the hon. Gentleman and I may well find ourselves with various common interests.

The House always takes well to kind remarks made about predecessors such as the immediate predecessor of the hon. Member for Hazel Grove, Sir Tom Arnold, especially when hon. Members realise that the remarks are genuine and not merely a form of words.

I must also compliment my hon. Friend the Member for Erewash (Liz Blackman) on her maiden speech. It is quite appropriate for me to compliment her since I am a fellow Derbyshire Member of Parliament. The kind words that she said about Angela Knight are appreciated. No one more than myself would argue and dispute many of the positions and lines that Angela Knight took. We all recognise that Angela Knight was a serious hon. Member representing serious interests on behalf of her constituents.

The interests of my hon. Friend the Member for Erewash and I directly linked on environmental matters when she referred to Stanton plc. I have a Stanton plc unit in my constituency. We have had problems with dioxin in the area, which was traced to the Stanton unit. Investigations in the Erewash area revealed similar problems. The problems were tackled, which shows that serious investigations into environmental matters enable us to discover what action is needed to correct such problems. They were corrected in both cases.

My hon. Friend the Member for Erewash also mentioned her experience in education. We have serious concerns about education in Derbyshire. In North-East Derbyshire, we have 45 primary schools, 41 of which—four small village schools apart—have a problem with class sizes. Those schools have classes of more than 30 pupils, and some have 40, 42 and 44. Therefore, Labour's commitment to tackling class sizes is very important. The other key to tackling education problems in Derbyshire is the future of the standard spending assessment and its calculation. Both my hon. Friend and myself are greatly concerned about that, and I am sure that we will unite to press the Government to correct the formula for Derbyshire.

All the maiden speeches have been fine speeches. In debates with short speeches, most hon. Members do not usually pay attention to what others are saying because they are waiting to say their own bit and get away. On this occasion, some fine maiden speeches have grabbed the attention of established hon. Members. Many of us feel that we need to look to our laurels with so much talent around and displayed in those speeches.

I wish to speak on a matter that I raised at the end of the previous Parliament, and I wish to continue to press the issue. Electoral registration involves a massive shortfall and we need a new, up-to-date system. On that issue, I am a Labour party moderniser, although some might dispute that title in connection with some of my other ideas. If we had had a modern electoral registration system for the election, many of those enfranchised would have been more likely to vote for Labour than for the previous Government. Our victory at the election would have been even more astounding if we had had an effective electoral register.

I was disappointed that it took so long to get hold of the figures for the numbers registered in each constituency at the end of the last Parliament. That information was provided only the day before the Parliament ended and I sought an emergency debate under Standing Order No. 20, because the figures were as bad as in previous years. The problems that I had highlighted in the House on many occasions still existed.

People may think that the urgency has gone from the issue because the election has passed, but it is still important, not least because of the debate that we will have this afternoon. If we are to have referendums for Scotland and Wales, we should ensure full registration. If, as some people suggest, thresholds are to apply to the referendums, the percentages should take account of the fact that the registers contain many redundant names.

The new Government need to clarify their position. The 1993 Plant report, which was presented to the Labour party, argued for a modern, rolling electoral register. I have explained the principle behind a rolling register to the House on previous occasions and, when we were in opposition, my colleagues on the Front Bench made some commitments to that idea. However, the rolling register and modern electoral registration techniques were not part of the "Road to the Manifesto" and were not in our actual manifesto. I was disappointed that those ideas were not discussed in the constitutional talks that were held with the Liberal Democrat party before the election. I was also disappointed that the Liberal Democrat party did not press the issue, because it had given solid support to my proposals for a rolling register.

I hope that we can now begin to prepare the ground for a new electoral registration system. I have often argued that 3 million to 4 million people are missing from the electoral register. We now need some investigation and research to check out that claim. I hope that the Home Office will undertake a thorough investigation of the arrangements for the general election, including registration. I would like the Home Affairs Select Committee, when it is appointed, to instigate a report to investigate the issue.

In 1991, the Office of Population Censuses and Surveys produced a report which has been very useful to me in my arguments about the numbers missing from registers. I hope that the Office for National Statistics will now update the work that was done in 1991.

I have asked Members, through *The House Magazine*, for any information that they have from canvassing returns that shows how many people on the registers have died or moved, how many are not registered and whether any other problems were discovered. I will deal with the information in confidence if necessary because I am interested only in the global figures. That evidence could form part of the investigations by the Home Office and the Home Affairs Select Committee.

I am convinced that the evidence will show the need for a rolling electoral register that puts people on the register when they move into an area and deletes their names when they are no longer there. It is nonsense that people who have died are left on electoral registers. Unless we take great care, we send electoral communications—even special postal shots on specific issues—to people who have died. However, councils receive regular weekly information from the registrars of births, deaths and marriages so that people can be

excluded from council tax and housing benefit. The changes could also be made to electoral registers, if we kept rolling registers.

We also need to begin to register homeless people. The legal definition of who can be included on a register is a problem because people must be residents. Residents have to have a residence and, by definition, a homeless person does not have a residence. Homeless people should be included on registers even if they have to use accommodation addresses, hostels, benefit offices or other places as their residence. The Home Office could make a difference by issuing an early circular to returning officers to make a liberal interpretation of the current law, but the wording of the law will need changing in the future.

Mr. Ken Purchase (Wolverhampton, North-East): My hon. Friend intends to increase opportunities to register, but does he agree with the proposition that no one should be forced to register? If he does, we have a problem in defining how many people are missing from the register. Those who do not wish to be registered are still counted in the some 4 million who are unregistered. Is there any way to distinguish between those who are not on the register through lack of opportunity or being thwarted by the system and those who do not wish to register?

Mr. Barnes: I want to do everything possible to give people the opportunity to register. Information about people moving could be made available to returning officers and requests to be registered could be fulfilled. As the law stands, a person can be fined £1,000 for failing to register. The offence is dealt with fairly leniently; I do not remember the last case in which a charge was brought—and I would not encourage that to happen. On the other hand, the fact that the provision remains may provide an extra pressure towards ensuring that people register.

Certainly there should be plenty of imaginative publicity about the need to register, and the importance of registration. People cannot even exercise an abstention, or show their abhorrence of politics in general, if they do not register, so as to show that they are among the genuine people who have not voted on a particular occasion.

The other electoral matter that needs tackling is access to polling stations for disabled people. I hope that that, too, will be taken up during the investigations. Scope and other bodies have produced valuable information about that problem. When I raised the subject during business questions, the Leader of the House pointed out some problems caused by the size of the ballot paper. In North-East Derbyshire the names on the ballot paper for the parliamentary election were in very small print, and it would have been problematic for a partially sighted person to read them.

Action must be taken. I have presented to the House many measures, such as ten-minute Bills and other private Members' Bills, both on the rolling register and on access to polling stations, although not yet on provisions for the homeless. I hope that the Government will give such matters serious consideration, so that by the next general election all the problems will have been resolved.

10.52 am

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): It is a great honour and privilege to be making my maiden speech, and to be following a parliamentarian of such distinction

[Mr. David Heath]

as the hon. Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes). He invited the Liberal Democrat party to support his views on registration, and although it would probably be inappropriate for me, as a new Member, to commit my party to that view, personally I saw a great deal of sense in what he said. I am sure that my right hon. and hon. Friends will consider carefully the points that the hon. Gentleman made, and will wish to pursue them.

I represent the people of Somerton and Frome, a constituency that forms a large part of Somerset, stretching from the northernmost tip, at Norton St. Philip, just outside Bath, to Beercrocombe, just outside Taunton, at the other end. I pay tribute to my predecessor, Mark Robinson, who served his constituents as an assiduous Member of Parliament, supporting them in dealing with their personal problems and doing all that he could to help them.

Mark Robinson also demonstrated over many years a genuine commitment to overseas development. He was parliamentary private secretary to Lady Chalker for many years, and although his commitment to the cause was not always reciprocated by his Front-Bench colleagues, it was notable and praiseworthy.

I also offer my sympathy to my predecessor and his wife in that we had such a tight vote in my constituency; the majority was 130. No human being should have to go through three counts. Whether one wins or loses, it is a tiresome occasion, and one is pleased to come out at the other end.

Historically, Somerset is a radical county. Some have described it as a county of revolting peasants, but that is a calumny. None the less, we have a tradition of independent thought and nonconformity, and of questioning the establishment wherever that may be, especially when it resides in the home counties.

We demonstrated those characteristics in no small degree in 1685, in Monmouth's rebellion, the last major rebellion on English soil. Many people in Somerset, myself included, are the direct descendants of rebels who took part in that rising.

Nowadays Somerset is a rather more peaceful place. Nobody once described it as characterised by cheese and churches, cider and smugness. I do not disavow the first three, but as for smugness, if we are smug it is simply because we have so much to be smug about in the beauty of the western counties.

I could indulge in a travelogue about the constituency, but that would take a long time because it is so large. Moreover, the names of many of the villages that I would encompass would be unintelligible to the *Hansard* reporters. Kingsbury Episcopi, Isle Abbots, Charlton Horethorne and Wyke Champflower are all lovely villages, and I could go on at length about their merits.

However, suffice it to say that the constituency that I represent has an interesting history, because of the many events that have taken place there. It also has an industrial history. For instance, it is a coal-mining constituency. Labour Members may not readily recognise that fact, but Somerton and Frome was a coal-mining constituency until 30 or 40 years ago, when the mines were closed.

Frome, the major town in the constituency, was a wool town, much despised by a former parliamentarian, William Cobbett, as the "Manchester of the south". Wool was a significant trade there in its time.

My constituency also once contained many islands, although now the levels have largely been drained, and one can get from island to island while staying relatively dry. However, once one had to take a boat, and there are still times when the Somerset levels revert to their previous condition and become the great mere of Somerset again.

Current industries range from quarrying—something that we have in common with the Derbyshire Members who have spoken this morning—to agriculture, and to the high-tech defence-related industries in some parts of the constituency. There is an enormous diversity of approach across the area.

When my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Mr. Russell) made his maiden speech the other day, he told us much about the merits of the city of Colchester, but as he sat down he said, sotto voce, that he had omitted to mention Queen Boadicea. Let me mention her now, because hon. Members will know that there is a statue of Boadicea, or Boudicca, on Westminster bridge. That statue was cast in Frome, and is a lasting mark here in Westminster of my constituency.

Over the centuries there has been a Liberal tradition in my part of Somerset. I am certainly not the first Liberal to represent at least part of the present constituency of Somerton and Frome. Indeed, there was a famous by-election victory in 1910, when Lloyd George spoke in the Wesley chapel in support of the candidate, who went on to win and take part in the great reforming Government of the early years of this century. Let us hope that that Government, and the 1946 Government, which many will remember, will not be the last reforming Governments in this century.

Thomas Hughes was once the Liberal Member of Parliament for Frome. He is famous for having written "Tom Brown's Schooldays", but he went on to become one of the founding members of the Co-operative movement, and so forms part of that radical tradition that informs west country politics.

New Members will all have listened with great interest to the debate on the Gracious Speech. As we demonstrated during that debate, there is much in the speech that Liberal Democrats can commend. But there are also gaps, which we shall seek to fill as the Parliament continues. For my constituents, one of the great tests will be not the intention—the intention is demonstrably good—but the outcome. We want to see whether the measures will actually make a difference for the people whom we represent.

Let me illustrate a few of the areas in which we shall make that test. The first, which has already been mentioned many times, is education. I am a former chairman of the Somerset education committee, and I do not believe that Somerset schoolchildren have been given a fair deal over recent years. This year's county council budget—set a few months ago—is the first for eight years without a real-terms cut in school funding. The reason for that is that Somerset was one of those rare authorities that felt unable to meet the demands of the capping regime of the previous Government. Here is an early test of the new Government's commitment to education. Will they impose a Conservative cap that will result in 90 teachers being sacked in Somerset?

Somerset is not an extravagant authority—historically, it is a low-spending authority—and it can demonstrate beyond peradventure the efficiency and effectiveness of

its education service. Its education service boasts the lowest administrative costs of any authority in the country, and it delegates more money to its schools than practically any other authority. It has the lowest number of surplus places in its primary schools of any county in England, and it tops up the Government's standard spending assessment by taking money from other areas in the council's work—for example, road repairs, some of which are badly needed—to a greater extent than any other county authority. That will be a test of whether the Government are committed to "education, education and education" and whether the money that they intend to release from the assisted places scheme will make any difference in a county such as Somerset, which is already so near the bone as far as education expenditure is concerned.

We will be looking for capital expenditure. Somerset maintains 267 schools, but last year was permitted to spend only £2 million on their upkeep. What commercial business would dream of running an estate of that size with that amount of capital reinvestment? It is a nonsense in education and business terms.

Let me move to the police. I served for a time as chairman of the Avon and Somerset police authority, and I remember regular visits to the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard) when he was Home Secretary. I do not know whether he was engaged in "semantic prestidigitation" at the time, but whenever we asked for 100 extra officers—the minimum the chief constable required to police the rural areas of Somerset properly—the answer was no one year, the next year and the third year. Again, this will be a test for the new Government. Will there be more police officers on the streets of Somerset as a result of the change in Government, or will their rhetoric mean nothing?

The third test will be the environment, which was strangely absent from the Gracious Speech. Why was that? Is it no longer to be a priority? If so, we Liberal Democrats will have a great deal to say about that. One environmental test will be the Government's housing allocations and whether they wish to see the continuation of the proposed suburbanisation of Somerset. I have the greatest regard for my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey) and his constituency, but Surbiton and Somerset are different places and we do not want to see Surbiton replicated in our rural county.

Finally, I refer to the health service. We shall be looking for an NHS dentistry service. There is no longer such a service in Frome, as we have lost the last dentist offering NHS treatment. Will the service be restored? I am an optician by training, although I am not practising. Will free eye tests—a single preventive measure that would make a real difference to the health of a great number of people—return? Incidentally, free eye tests would save the health service a great deal of money in the long term by preventing diseases such as glaucoma by catching them early, rather than in their operative stages. Will we see a commitment to local hospitals—such as those in Wincanton which are currently under threat—and to acute services?

In a maiden speech, it is nice to be able to range over a wider area than is normal. My right hon. Friend the Member for Yeovil (Mr. Ashdown)—my constituency neighbour—has, for my sins, asked me to speak on Europe in the next few months. When I do so, I shall be arguing for a radical reform of the common agricultural

policy and the common fisheries policy, and for the informed consent of the peoples of Europe to any changes resulting from the Amsterdam summit. I shall argue for a genuine commitment to subsidiarity at all levels—European, national and local—and for greater accountability within the structures of Europe, but that will wait for another day.

Suffice it to say today that I am proud to represent my constituents in Somerset. I am a Somerset man, and I will unashamedly support the interests of the people of Somerset in this House. I look forward to an interesting time over the next few years in the hope that the great expectations raised by the election are not disappointed by the performance of the Government in attempting to realise their intentions.

11.5 am

Lorna Fitzsimons (Rochdale): May I start by paying tribute to the eloquent speech of the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath), who reminded me of a previous Liberal Member of this House, Clement Freud? We could perhaps adopt the hon. Gentleman as a Lancashire man because of the similarities between his constituency and mine. I did not know about those similarities before he made his maiden speech, but they are amazing—the Co-operative movement, wool and cotton provide a bond between us, although not a party political one.

I concur with my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes), who referred to electoral registration and access for disabled people to democracy. Those two issues came up time and again during the general election campaign and, as a new hon. Member, I will be looking forward to the Government taking a keen interest in them. Although we had a wonderful turnout in Rochdale among young people and first-time voters, it is clear that much work has still to be done on the issue of electoral registration.

My hon. Friend the Member for North-East Derbyshire also referred to the sincerity of tributes. I should like to talk about three previous Members for my constituency, as they are the three who have represented me since I was born and brought up in the Rochdale constituency—Liz Lynne, Sir Cyril Smith and Jack McCann. First, I should like to pay a sincere tribute to Liz Lynne. Although she was not Rochdale born and bred, she showed in her five years as our Member of Parliament that one could have an impact nationally and locally as a new Member of Parliament. Liz did a lot of pioneering work, especially on one of her dear subjects—disabled people. I hope to continue locally and nationally the good work that Liz did in that area, and in many others. Many people felt fondly about Liz, and I wish her well.

There is a joke in Rochdale—a polite one of course—that any public occasion to which I am invited with Sir Cyril Smith is a bit like "The Little and Large Show". I know that it is meant with great affection for Sir Cyril, who is an incredible act to follow. There are many ex-Members of Parliament, but Sir Cyril has a place in the history books and an honoured place in the history of Rochdale. The reason he was successful—bar party politics in Rochdale—was that he was a man of the people. Some criticised him for staying in Rochdale, but it meant that there were not many there whom he did not help in his 20-year career. If, in my time as a Member of

[Lorna Fitzsimons]

Parliament, I can help as many people as Sir Cyril did, I will feel that I have done the job that the people of Rochdale sent me here to do.

A quarter of a century on, it would be remiss of me not to acknowledge the debt of thanks that I should pay to the last Labour Member of Parliament for Rochdale, the late Jack McCann. Although Jack was the first Member of Parliament for my constituency I knew—I am fibbing really as I was a tad too young really to have known him—I got a full picture of Jack McCann the man and the politician on the doorsteps. Lots of Rochdadians—generally older people—truly remembered the man and felt proud to have known him. They loved him—they loved his honesty and felt that he truly worked for Rochdale. That is what I hope to continue.

Rochdale has a proud tradition of what I would call quirky characters as its Members of Parliament and I hope to follow in that tradition in some way—although I am only 5 ft tall, I do not need a microphone. One of the most moving occasions during the election campaign was just before my adoption meeting, when I received a telephone call at our campaign headquarters. I was asked, in an agile voice, “Can I speak to Lorna Fitzsimons please?” The caller introduced herself as Alice McCann, Jack McCann’s wife. She was bright as a button at the age of 83 and raring to go, asking, “When can I come and help? We’ve got to make sure we return a Labour MP this time. Twenty-five years on, it’s about time.” She painted the most beautiful picture of Rochdale when Jack won his by-election. She said that it was amazing; it was two weeks after the Munich air disaster. One can imagine what it was like in Rochdale. God bless Rochdale football club, but the majority of people actually support the Reds. The tone in the town and the country was very sombre and we were knee deep in snow in one of the worst winters, but the atmosphere after the by-election was electric with hope and optimism—the real attitude that Rochdale and true Rochdadians embody. That is what brought home to me the character and spirit of Rochdale.

I have the greatest pride in representing my home town. Under the new boundary changes, my village of Wardle and that of Littleborough have been brought into the constituency. Being able to say that I was born in a local hospital, Birch Hill, went to one of the new local schools—Wardle high school—and then worked in the constituency gives me a great heritage and an advantage in understanding the needs of the constituency.

Rochdale has a rich tapestry, whether in textiles, in which I am proud to be a skilled labourer—I did a degree in textiles and followed in my father’s footsteps as he worked in the mills—or in brass bands. A little-known fact about me is that I am a secret horn player, or was when I was at school. I am proud to say that at the car boot sales in Rochdale there are one or two copies of the LP to which my name is attached. There is also the attitude of the people. They have warm, open hearts and they are honest. We might be a bit blunt now and again, but we are honest, warm and welcoming. The people are vibrant and colourful.

At the heart of the town—in the centre—we have a huge Asian population. My right hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman) mentioned the

curry mile in his opening speech on the Loyal Address; we have our own curry street in my constituency. Asian small businesses are at the heart of rebuilding Rochdale.

Rochdale has many expectations of this Government, and quite rightly. In the past 18 years, it has paid the price for the lack of investment, especially in our manufacturing base and our young people. The textile industry has been decimated. There is now a new drive, with a new Member of Parliament, a new leader of the council and a new team forming to put Rochdale back on the map where it should be, right at the heart of the economic and industrial revolution. I want to be known as the person who helped Rochdale to be the economic gateway to our liberation.

The other travesty of the past 18 years that Rochdale has had to witness is youth unemployment. The people of Rochdale are talented and hard working but, sadly, they have not had the opportunities—especially the under-25s—that they should have had. As a new constituency Member of Parliament, one of the big challenges for me is to provide opportunities through the much needed welfare-to-work programme outlined in the Gracious Speech. I will be working with my colleagues to ensure that all the needy young people in Rochdale get a chance at a real job or training opportunity to change the cycle of despair. On some of our estates—the Kirkholt estate, to name one—there is now much hope.

Everyone might think that *The Sun* or Alastair Campbell coined the phrase, “The Blair babes”. Rochdale would like to think that it got there first, because we have a group of women called the Brimrod babes. They do not know that I am mentioning them in my maiden speech. Much has been made of the number of women Members in this new Parliament. I want to pay tribute to my Brimrod babes—the women who live on one cul-de-sac on a council estate. They are grandmothers, mothers and daughters—three generations—who have never had any formal education, by which I mean further or higher education, or been involved in politics. They were captivated. I do not know what happened precisely to their awareness, but watching my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister in the run-up to the general election, they decided to get active. They taught me many lessons about not presuming things about people. They liberated themselves and they helped me to get elected. I would take anyone who is in any doubt about the importance of this Parliament to their cul-de-sac and their homes. The way in which they have learnt that they can change their own lives and that we can help them is amazing. If, in my time as Member of Parliament for Rochdale, I can show the courage that they have shown to overcome their inhibitions and lack of confidence and get involved, I will be proud of what I have done.

Rochdale has a lot to offer economically, socially and culturally, such as in helping and guiding our quest to ensure that everyone in the world has access to human rights. Hon. Members who know that we have a large Pakistani community will understand the importance of Kashmir to the people of Rochdale. Our history is one of wide openness and of welcoming people of all races, creeds, countries and colours to Rochdale. That means not only that charity starts at home, but that we must remember that we cannot settle unless our sisters and brothers in Kashmir and elsewhere have access to democracy and human rights. The commitment to human rights made by my right hon. Friend the new Foreign Secretary and in the Gracious Speech was welcome to my constituents.

The other welcome commitment in the Gracious Speech concerned health. Like many other constituencies, Rochdale has a health care crisis. It is a crisis not in terms of bed blocking, but in that we have a mortality rate 10 per cent. above the national average. That is a travesty. The people of Rochdale, therefore, welcome the new Government's commitment to health care. For the first time, there is a Minister with responsibility for health in the community, who can tackle some of the problems that are causing deaths in Rochdale.

The crisis is such that we desperately need the private finance initiative to work. The people of Rochdale need accessible health care, and one of the most exercising points of the campaign in the past six months and beyond was the future of Rochdale hospital. I shall work alongside the new Front-Bench team and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health to ensure that the private finance initiative works.

Because of the way in which the country has been run over the past 18 years, there is not enough money in the public purse to make the investment that we know is needed in our health service. The people of Rochdale have journeyed to the practical conclusion that they therefore need a successful partnership with the private sector; that has not been easy for some of them, but they have been courageous and know that all solutions must be considered. I hope that in this Parliament I can show the same ingenuity in seeking solutions to problems in my constituency and further afield.

I pay tribute to the people of Rochdale who voted for me as one of the younger new Members of Parliament, proving that young people have a voice right at the heart of Government and can effect change. If I can in any way emulate the history of those people who have worked in Rochdale for a better Britain, I shall truly have been a good parliamentarian.

11.20 am

Mr. Stephen Hepburn (Jarrow): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to speak so early in this Parliament; with so many new Members coming in at the general election, I had visions, or perhaps nightmares, of making my maiden speech some time around Christmas, so I am delighted to get in.

It is an honour to serve in the House, with the tradition and history that it oozes—I thank first the members of the Jarrow Labour party who nominated me and the constituents who voted me into this splendid House to represent their interests—but I hope that my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House will take on board some changes that could be made to improve its functioning. I draw attention to the voting system in particular. I read recently about schools being failed after a visit from a group of inspectors; if that group studied our voting system, we would certainly be failed automatically. That should be considered, but I leave it in the hands of the Leader of the House.

I pay tribute to my predecessor, Don Dixon. I am in a good position to do that, as I am a good friend of his and have known him for many years. Many hon. Members will know Don; he certainly stamped his authority on the House in his role as Opposition Deputy Chief Whip. He came from a traditional, humble background in Jarrow. He had a basic education; worked in a shipyard; came up through trade union politics; became leader of Jarrow

council; and was elected to Tyneside council, transforming the whole of south Tyneside with his vision of council housing. He was then elected to the House in 1979, and served it well.

The great thing about Don was that he set great store by loyalty; he has shown loyalty to all those who know him, to the Labour party and, as I know for a fact, to the House. I am sure that hon. Members of all parties respect the job that he did, and I thank my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister for recommending his early elevation to the House of Lords; we in Jarrow see that as a tribute to Don, and we take it as a tribute to the people of Jarrow.

It is customary for new Members to speak about the constituency for which they have been elected. Once again, I am in a fairly good position, as I was born, bred and educated in Jarrow and know the town very well, but the constituency contains not only the town of Jarrow but the town of Hebburn; the villages of Boldon, Cleadon and Whitburn; and the new ward of Wrekendyke, which was transferred in the recent boundary changes.

My constituency is, of course, very famous in Labour history. It was built over the past century on a heavy industrial base on the Tyne. Sadly, that base declined through the 1980s. The last coalfield in Jarrow has closed, as have the steel industry and most of the shipping industry. With those closures, I am sad to say, many good, hard-working, decent people were discarded and told, "We no longer need your services, thank you very much." That is and always will be a tragedy and a message about what happened in the 1980s.

If there is one message that I would like to get across in this maiden speech, it is the need for jobs in Jarrow. It is very sad that, last Monday, yet another Jarrow march set off, this time on the way to Europe, nearly 61 years after the first Jarrow march, when Ellen Wilkinson and 200 men from Jarrow walked to London in the search for jobs.

At the meeting to see the marchers setting off for Europe on Monday, I expressed the hope that it would be the last march to have to leave Jarrow in search of jobs. Remember that the marchers who left on Monday left with exactly the same principles as those who left in 1936: they were after not handouts or charity, but real jobs, because unemployment affects people as individuals; it affects families; and, if there is mass unemployment, as there is in the north and in Jarrow in particular, it affects the town. It is no wonder that there are social divisions throughout the country.

It has sometimes annoyed me over the past decade or so—I hope that Ministers will take this on board—that unemployment is spoken of in percentages, with this per cent. in Jarrow, that per cent. in Liverpool and so on. Percentages are no good, because an unemployed individual is 100 per cent. unemployed. It is important to remember that.

Old habits die hard: I was reading Ellen Wilkinson's book, "The Town That Was Murdered", and found some interesting parallels between the 1930s and the 1980s. For example, she said that in the mid-1930s unemployment in Jarrow was about 70 per cent., while in the neighbouring town of Hebburn it was lower, so the Government decided to merge the figures and came up with a figure of 35 per cent.: they cut unemployment overnight. There is an interesting parallel with the 30 changes in the way in which the figures have been calculated.

[Mr. Stephen Hepburn]

Ellen Wilkinson also provided some interesting parallels concerning youth unemployment, which was rife then as now in Jarrow, and about people being thrown on the scrap heap at 40 and left to go stale and vegetate at home, wasting all the skills and promise that they showed in early life.

As Member of Parliament for Jarrow, I want to press the claim for jobs, which I consider to be imperative. That is why I welcome the Government's jobs package to get 250,000 youngsters nationally from welfare into work and to give the long-term unemployed the chance to get back into work, financed by a windfall tax on the privatised utilities.

Of course, we would be kidding everybody if we said we could build utopia overnight, but we must remember that the Labour party's pledges are a commitment and an indication of our priorities. The unemployed are of central importance to our programme. We are making a start, and I am sure that we will do more over the coming Parliament.

It is not as though the people of Jarrow and the surrounding area were lying back through the 1980s. Both councils in my constituency, South Tyneside and Gateshead, have been working actively with the private sector to try to generate jobs in the area. In particular, South Tyneside, which covers most of my constituency, has drawn up many innovative schemes to try to rejuvenate the area, in partnership with the private and voluntary sectors through an organisation called STEP, the South Tyneside Enterprise Partnership. Schemes include extension of the metro, provision of a second Tyne tunnel through a private finance initiative project, and preparation of green-field sites for industry.

I make no bones about the fact that I will press the Government on jobs for my area. I hope that we will get positive, urgent decisions on matters such as the second Tyne tunnel and STEP's single regeneration budget bid, which covers Jarrow and Hebburn. We need early decisions because those matters are vital for the area. There is much hope in my constituency. I make no apology for pressing the case for jobs in Jarrow, as other hon. Members will for their constituencies. I will often repeat the same message. I hope that we will be able to deliver for the people of Jarrow.

11.30 am

Mr. Paul Marsden (Shrewsbury and Atcham): I congratulate my hon. Friends the Members for Jarrow (Mr. Hepburn), for Rochdale (Lorna Fitzsimons), for Chorley (Mr. Hoyle), for Erewash (Liz Blackman) and for Dudley, North (Mr. Cranston), and the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris), among others, on making their maiden speeches.

I am the first ever Labour Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham. Against all the odds, we won the seat, but we also won the argument. It was Labour, not the Liberal Democrats, who fought the Conservatives. It will be like that for ever more. We shall continue to win because people will back new Labour as they need a good, hard-working constituency Member of Parliament and a good new Labour Government.

I pay tribute to my predecessor, Mr. Derek Conway, who gave the constituency great public service for 14 years. I pay tribute also to his predecessor,

Sir John Langford-Holt, who was held in great affection and high regard for 38 years before Mr. Conway. As I am only the third Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham since the war, I trust that the precedent for such longevity of service will continue. I pledge that I will fight for the people of Shrewsbury and Atcham with great heart and vigour.

I thank the Palace of Westminster staff, who have been so kind and helpful not only to me but to other new Members. They have set a standard in friendliness and in always being able to help us out. I also thank the voters who voted for me and my campaign team, who worked so tirelessly. I must thank my wife, Shelly, and my son, Alexander, who sacrificed much family life so that I could be here. I ask the powers that be to spell my wife's name correctly. I do not want to incur her wrath; in a choice between her wrath and the wrath of the Whips, give me the Whips' wrath any time. To those who warn that I would not want to incur the wrath of the Whips, I say, "You don't know my wife."

Last week, I brought my son, who is only 18 months old, to the Commons. One problem was that I had to explain that the television sets around the House cannot yet be tuned to Postman Pat or the Teletubbies. However, I might push the Finance and Services Committee to consider the possibility. My other problem was that my son is so young that he did not know the ways of this great Palace. When he could not get his own way, he decided to lie prostrate in the corridors of power, kicking and screaming. I was a little embarrassed until I found that that was not too unusual in the Commons.

To echo other maiden speeches, I hope that the House will become more family-friendly. I know that great strides have already been made but, as a father, I shall support measures to make it more user-friendly to families.

It is a great honour to serve the people of Shrewsbury and Atcham. The constituency's history goes back thousands of years. The village of Wroxeter, which is near Shrewsbury, was a Roman city—in its heyday, the fourth largest in Britain. Acton Burnell, another small village near Shrewsbury, held the third Parliament of Edward I.

Some might disagree, but I truly believe that Shrewsbury is delightful—the finest town in England. It is dominated by its 15th-century black and white Tudor housing and narrow cobbled streets. It is the birthplace of Charles Darwin. The surrounding villages account for my constituency's name. Atcham represents the quarter of its voters who live in rural areas. It is some of the most beautiful countryside to be seen. Hon. Members may recall that we have an annual flower show. I do not want to cause a dispute with the Minister for sport, but it can hold its own with any in the country.

Shrewsbury does not rely only on the past. It has a great future. It has a thriving business community with great plans for expansion. I trust that I can play a part in bringing more investment to the town and surrounding areas. I hope that our Challenge 2000 bid to try to create a new business venture in the north of Shrewsbury, which will bring up to 2,500 much needed jobs to the town, will be successful. Youth unemployment is especially bad in some deprived areas of Shrewsbury. People may say, "What deprived areas in Shrewsbury?" However, there are such areas. Many towns and villages around Britain have, like some parts of Shrewsbury, suffered over the

past 18 years. I hope that our pledge to put 250,000 youngsters back to work or into training will help up to 200 young people in the Shrewsbury area. I shall work in partnership with councils, businesses, the voluntary sector or whoever else to help to bring more jobs to Shrewsbury.

I mentioned the Acton Burnell Parliament of 1283, the main purpose of which was to provide for the recovery of debts. I welcome the measure in the Gracious Speech that will ensure that, at long last, large companies pay their debts on time. Small businesses have suffered much: one has gone out of business every three minutes since 1992. We need to help them quickly. Those entrepreneurs will help us to forge ahead and create more jobs.

The new Labour Government have set a new direction and offer new politics for Britain. For business circles, one of the Government's main attributes will be the creation of private-public partnerships and agreements. I echo the remarks of my hon. Friend the Member for Rochdale. The public purse cannot fund everything in future. We must take the social conscience of the public sector and work with the dynamic, efficient private sector to come together as one to provide the services that the country needs.

On business, I look forward to the information technology opportunities that lie ahead, especially for rural areas. Many young people in rural areas in my constituency could work from home, the village hall or a communal area using information technology.

It was a great travesty to see Shrewsbury Town football club relegated last season. Of course, that occurred under my predecessor, so I look forward to the football club rightly being promoted in the coming seasons so that it can become a centre for the town.

Farming is of key importance in my constituency and farmers there have been devastated by BSE. The handling of the BSE crisis was terrible and I welcome the Foreign Secretary's pledge to work with Europe and to be at the centre of Europe in order to ensure the lifting of the beef ban as quickly as possible. I cannot stress enough how hard the crisis has hit some of those beef farmers, especially those on small farms. They have had to endure not just the financial hardship but the mental stress that has been inflicted on themselves and their families. I trust that things will improve quickly.

We need a reform of the common agricultural policy and it must be linked to enhancing the environment. We must ensure that in future we do not pay farmers to do nothing with set-aside. We should ask them and pay them to enhance the environment.

I should like to say a quick word about our terrific hospital, the Royal Shrewsbury. It has had to undergo incredible hardship and cuts over the past 18 years and I pay tribute to all the staff, the doctors, nurses, auxiliaries and consultants, who have worked so hard to provide such an excellent service in spite of financial difficulties.

I want to extend a warm invitation to any hon. Member to come to Shrewsbury to taste the delights of such a wonderful area and take in the beautiful countryside.

11.41 am

Dr. Brian Iddon (Bolton, South-East): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Mr. Marsden) on his maiden speech and on being the first Labour Member for that constituency. I want to begin

with a denial—I am not 27. It came as a great shock to me to see in *The Observer* after my election that I was down as one of the new young intake. It has never been more true that one should not believe all one reads in the newspapers, even the quality ones.

It is a great privilege to be elected to represent the constituency of Bolton, South-East, which comprises parts of the old Bolton borough along with villages such as Little Lever and Kearsley and the former mining community of Farnworth. It is a mixed rural and urban community with a large Muslim population.

We made history on 1 May by returning for the first time three Labour Members representing the great town of Bolton. We have a Labour Member of the European Parliament and we have a substantial Labour council. Together, we shall put great pressure on the shakers and movers in this place to bring benefits to the people of my constituency and the rest of Bolton.

Burnden park, the former home of Bolton Wanderers football club, is in my constituency. I say "former" because that great football team is on the move—it is going up to the premier division following an extremely successful season and is moving to a new stadium at Horwich, which is in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton, West (Ms Kelly). Before that great football team leaves my constituency, I want to place on record my congratulations on its past success and my best wishes for its future success.

The former member for my constituency was David Young, a Scotsman born in Greenock. He became a teacher in the midlands before entering Parliament in 1974 as the Member for the Bolton, East constituency. I helped David fight that 1974 election, so I have known him for a long time, and I was his constituency chairman twice. From 1977 to 1979, David served as the parliamentary private secretary to the then Secretary of State for Defence, Fred Mulley. As hon. Members will know, David had a keen interest in foreign affairs and was well travelled. He was an excellent constituency member and was in touch with all the electorate of Bolton, South-East, including the large Muslim community.

Bolton has suffered badly over the past two decades. Its textile and engineering industries have been decimated, with the loss of thousands of jobs. The miners have all lost their jobs and there is no longer a single pit left in the north-west following the recent closure of Parkside colliery. However, because of the robust nature of Boltonians and a keen interest by the local authority in creating new jobs, Bolton has picked itself up and adopted new skills.

I encourage anyone who has not visited this great town to do so. Outside Manchester it has one of the finest shopping centres in the north-west and our markets are a tourist attraction. It has a strong cultural tradition, with several fine museums, including the Hall-ith-Wood museum where Samuel Crompton invented the spinning mule. Arkwright also worked in the town. They were the pioneers of the industrial revolution. More recently, Sir Harry Kroto, educated at Bolton school, won the Nobel prize for chemistry. As a fellow chemist, I should like to add my congratulations to him. I should also mention Susan Isaacs, who was one of the pioneers of nursery education. I am pleased to learn that the Government have a keen interest in promoting such education. It has been revealed in the past few days in the

[Dr. Brian Iddon]

Bolton Evening News that even my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has a family tree that goes back to relatives in our town.

Two things propelled me to seek election to this place. First, as a chemist, about once a month for the past 29 years I have travelled Europe and visited nearly every university and polytechnic in the land presenting a show called "The Magic of Chemistry". It is an attempt to communicate science to the general public. One of my interests at Westminster will be to promote a public understanding of science. I am still a member of the Royal Society of Chemistry and will remain so. I take a keen interest in the teaching of chemistry and in the chemical industry.

I have been a member of Bolton council for almost 20 years and served for 10 years as its chairman of housing. That is my greatest interest, and I shall be following up housing issues in the House. The housing committee in Bolton has been extremely innovative and there are some examples that we should promote for the rest of the country.

We began a dispute service between neighbours, called the Bolton neighbourhood dispute service. It is run by a superb organiser, Sue Parry, and employs 42 volunteers to mediate between neighbours who often have not spoken to each other for several years. I am pleased to say that the success rate for cases referred to it is over 80 per cent. We were the first local authority in the land to start such a mediation service and it is now being modelled by authorities throughout the north and, I hope, soon, throughout the country. I shall be promoting such services for other local authorities.

That service recently expanded into something else, which is extremely novel. I am sure that all hon. Members are aware of the problem of bullying in schools. In Bolton, we are now training young people to mediate to solve the problem of bullying, and I commend such a service to other hon. Members for their areas.

When I was chairman of housing, I hit several problems, one of which was a rapidly escalating housing waiting list. It had been about 5,000, but suddenly it started to escalate and reached a peak at 8,000. I felt that I had to do something about it, so one day I walked into the office of the director of housing and said to Mr. George Caswell, "I want a partnership between this council, the Housing Corporation and some of the leading housing associations in the town." I have to pay tribute to Mr. Caswell, because within six months he had created an organisation called Bolton Community Homes Ltd., which has been one of the finest examples of partnership in housing across the land.

In approximately three years, we delivered 1,700 homes to cure the problem of the escalating waiting list. We did not build just ordinary homes for ordinary people. We built specialised homes for the disabled and other people with special problems. Indeed, the architects went to the very people who were to live in those homes—especially disabled people—and asked them what facilities they would like, and where they should be situated in the house. In other words, the people themselves helped the architects to design homes for them to live in. I recommend that approach to other people.

The old cotton towns of the north have a serious problem. They have row upon row of old, terraced houses well over 120 years old, the fabric of which is crumbling. That is the towns' biggest problem. I shall be pressing the Minister of State, Departments of the Environment, Transport and the Regions—my hon. Friend the Member for North-West Durham (Ms Armstrong), who has responsibility for housing—very hard on the matter. We have 23,000 unfit homes in Bolton. The environmental health officers consider that about 5,000 to 6,000 of them are irredeemably unfit and should be knocked down—and this is 1997.

Since 1979, we have lost more than 70 per cent. of our housing funding and we have not been able to tackle the substantial problems as we wanted. The Conservative Government reduced the grant for private sector improvements from a high level of 95 per cent. in 1979 to a low level of 60 per cent., where it remains today. That means that local councils have to borrow 40 per cent. of the money needed to improve private sector homes, and that is while their total expenditure is capped. It has been absolutely impossible for any local authority in the country, especially Bolton, to tackle that serious problem.

The Conservative Government bragged about spending the same on housing as the Labour Government spent when they left office in 1979. That is true, but the difference is that in 1979, the Labour Government were spending most of their housing money on bricks and mortar, whereas the outgoing Conservative Government spent most of their money on housing benefit, in pursuance of a dogmatic belief in market rents. Incidentally, they were never able to define market rents.

It is a scandal that so much money is spent on housing benefit. We must direct housing money away from benefits and into renovation and new homes for the homeless across Britain. Under the Conservatives, the housing benefit bill rose from about £3 billion when the Labour Government left office in 1979 to a rapidly escalating £13 billion today. The new Labour Government face an enormous problem even in halting the growth in housing benefit, never mind reversing the trend.

It will be a privilege to represent my constituents in Bolton, South-East. In my election campaign, I promised that in the House of Commons I would do my best for them, and I will.

11.53 am

Ms Kali Mountford (Colne Valley): I am glad to have the opportunity to speak this morning on my first occasion in the House, in what has been a veritable confetti of maiden speeches. I stand in the shadow of some great speeches. I first refer to my right hon. Friend—I am sorry, I am elevating my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton, South-East (Dr. Iddon) far too soon. First, he is too young and now he has been here a long time. I was struck by the similarities between his constituency and mine as he talked about the weaving industry and his experience in housing.

Likewise, I am delighted to hear that the son of my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Mr. Marsden) came to the House at the age of 18 months, beating my own record of early interest in politics. I became interested at 14. I hope that my hon. Friend's son follows in his great footsteps. My hon. Friend the Member for Jarrow (Mr. Hepburn) made a

moving speech about his constituency, with its great and sound history. I know that his constituency will have a great fighter in him.

My hon. Friend the Member for Rochdale (Lorna Fitzsimons) has now left the Chamber. Her name rang around the debating halls of this country long before she became a Member of Parliament. I know that her great voice, embodied in a small body, will add a great deal to the House. It will be difficult for me, standing in the shadow of those wonderful speeches, to deliver my own maiden speech.

It is normal in the House to follow certain traditions. Those traditions were taught to me at the age of 14 by my teachers of history, government and citizenship. They are two great sisters who, I am glad to say, wrote to me yesterday. I was touched to receive their letter. I have remembered them all these years as an inspiration and I am delighted that they have noticed that I have arrived here at last after 30 years. They would be embarrassed if I named them, but I have to say that good teachers who inspire a person and whose teaching takes people through life are worth more than gold. Those two teachers were worth more than gold to me.

What my teachers taught me about the traditions of this House was the importance of democracy. We had some talk of democracy earlier today and I was delighted that there were parties of schoolchildren in the Gallery at the time. I hope that although the House is fairly quiet this morning, they will have been inspired by this great place. Democracy is nothing if we do not take part in it.

The thing that I learned when I was taught government and citizenship by those two great teachers was that we as a people have to take part in our own state—the state of the nation and the state of our democracy. I hope that the new Secretary of State for Education and Employment will take that on board as we examine the standards of education for the future. It is all very well to have basic standards of education, but I have met people in my constituency who do not know the difference between local government and Parliament, and who do not know how or where to vote, and people who do not know that they can vote or how to put their name on the electoral register. It is a sad indictment of a democracy if its people are not actively involved in the process.

I shall return to the traditions of the House, because I do not want to let my teachers down. I want to talk about my constituency of Colne Valley. It is often confused with other constituencies because it is named after the River Colne. Make no mistake, there are two valleys in the constituency—the Colne valley and the Holme valley. It is in the Colne valley that one finds great traditional industrial heritage. It has those oft-sung-about satanic mills nestled in its great splendour and rugged hillsides.

To the south is the Holme valley, with its beautiful picture-postcard elegance—those green and pleasant pastures. The contrast of the two valleys has attracted the television and film industry to my constituency. I am pleased about that because the television and film industry has an income equal to that of the oil industry. It is an importer of great wealth into our country.

The three programmes that I want to talk about should be well known to hon. Members. The first is "Last of the Summer Wine", with Compo, Clegg and Foggy, those three great characters. The programme may mislead hon.

Members into thinking that the people of Colne Valley are quite elderly. In fact, they are younger than the national average for any constituency. So please do not be misled by that great programme.

Two new television programmes have appeared on our screens, "Where the Heart is"—my heart is certainly in the Colne valley—and "Wokenwell", which those of us who live nearby know is actually filmed at Marsden. "Where the Heart is" is filmed outside my house in Slaithwaite, so I am extremely proud.

I particularly want to talk about the film and television industry, because it embodies technical skills and the great talents of producers, film technicians and the actors we all know. That industry is dependent on high-quality products, high-quality skills and well-paid jobs. That is the foundation for a proper strong, key economic base, the sort of economic base that I support.

In his maiden speech, my predecessor, Graham Riddick, referred to "Last of the Summer Wine", and also eulogised about our beautiful constituency. I agree with him on both those counts. Alas, I do not agree with very much else that he said in that speech, nor with very much else that he said after that. Hon. Members on both sides of the House would agree, however, that he was a man who argued valiantly for the things in which he believed, often in the face of great opposition—indeed, some hon. Members on his own Benches did not always agree with him. He always stood up for what he believed in and the people of Colne Valley recognised that.

In his maiden speech, my predecessor spoke up for the demolition of one of our local mills, which he described as an eyesore and which he said should be razed to the ground. I am pleased to inform the House that that mill has now been restored to its former magnificent splendour. Kirklees council, a good Labour council which I am happy to support, formed a joint venture company to achieve that transformation. That venture brought together the skills of the local construction industry, which was so short of jobs, and the need of the community for good housing. It has been a magnificent success. The former mill now provides 122 new homes for the people of Colne Valley. It also provided high-quality, good, well-paid jobs for architects, joiners, builders, plumbers and many, many more.

I approve of that type of marriage between industry, its needs and the needs of the community. I am delighted that the Labour manifesto, which has now been translated into a wonderful Gracious Speech, includes such partnerships.

If we were able to release the £30 million of housing capital receipts now held by Kirklees council, imagine how we could spend that money to invigorate our local economy. Despite the imagination of Kirklees council, which established the joint venture company to redevelop Crowther mill, there is still much to do.

Colne Valley does not suffer from the same type of housing shortage as elsewhere, but some of our housing stock is dilapidated, particularly that in the private rented sector. I am extremely worried about one family in my community whose house is so wet and damp that both their children suffer greatly from asthma. One child, born just in January this year, is already taking eight steroids a day. Her doctor has told her mother that that is because of the damp condition of her home. How wonderful it will be to renovate social housing and build it anew so that

[*Ms Kali Mountford*]

such families have the opportunity of a decent home. That development will also benefit the construction industry, which we need in Colne Valley.

Let us also consider the implications of the windfall levy and our plans for how we might use it in Kirklees. We aim once again to bring together the skills of our community and the needs of the population. If we develop the construction industry, and we shall, it will provide a great opportunity to train more people to have the very skills that will be needed in that expanding industry. In my area we are already looking at ways in which we could use the windfall levy to create the opportunities to learn those new skills. That would also enable people to gain the new jobs that will be created as a result.

The former Labour Member for Colne Valley, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, my right hon. Friend the Member for South Shields (Dr. Clark), will be pleased to discover that part of our plans for the windfall levy includes the introduction of a new environmental task force. We have a great need for that force in Colne Valley because of its canals, rivers and dry stone walls, which need to be renovated. Those environmental needs are also social needs when we consider the need for environmental improvements to homes on our estates. Again, overcoming those problems will involve a partnership between the needs of our community and the skills of our population.

When my right hon. Friend made his maiden speech, he made great reference to the environment. On a visit to Scapegoat Hill school in my constituency, I saw some trees that my right hon. Friend had planted 25 years ago. They are now growing vigorously despite harsh conditions, which may offer a parallel to the Labour party and its development in recent years.

I am sure that when my right hon. Friend referred to the importance of the environment, he envisaged that the environment of Colne Valley would be improved by measures such as those contained in the Gracious Speech, which we supported so strongly yesterday.

I am also pleased to recognise the contribution made to my constituency by Richard Wainwright, who was the Member until 1987. In his maiden speech, he referred to the traditional industrial heritage of Colne Valley and spoke about the local mills. We now need to diversify our economy, because too much dependence on the traditional industries of the mills will mean that our local economy will die on the vine. We cannot allow that to happen. The use of the windfall levy, capital receipts and the great progress made in welfare-to-work programmes will give us the opportunity to make our local economy as diverse as the many villages and people who reside in Colne Valley. That is the right way forward. We cannot once again depend on one industry, because that would lead to the death of our local economy. I want Colne Valley to have a strong and vigorous economic future.

It has also been a tradition for the Member for Colne Valley to talk about our great history, and I do not want to let my predecessors down on this occasion. Let me take the House back briefly to 1907, when the first socialist Labour Member was elected for Colne Valley—Victor Grayson, who subsequently mysteriously disappeared. I agree with my predecessor Graham Riddick that that is one tradition that I do not want to follow. Heaven knows

where he ended up, but I am glad to have ended up here. Other great names, such as Philip Snowden, were also referred to by my predecessors, and who can forget that Harold Wilson was born in my constituency.

What a great tradition for any new Member to follow, and I am glad to do so. In the shadow of the many speeches that I have heard this morning and of the great politicians who came before me, as the first woman Member for Colne Valley, I hope to achieve at least half of what they achieved.

12.7 pm

Mr. John Cryer (Hornchurch): I am grateful to be called just before the Leader of the House. I pay tribute to those colleagues who have made their maiden speeches today, which have all been excellent, particularly those from the new Members for Colne Valley (Ms Mountford), for Bolton, South-East, (Dr. Iddon), for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Mr. Marsden), for Jarrow (Mr. Hepburn) and for Rochdale (Lorna Fitzsimons).

The issue that I should like to raise this morning is the future of Oldchurch hospital at Romford in east London. That hospital was on the previous Government's hit list of those under threat of closure in Greater London. A huge campaign to keep that hospital open has been run for about six years. If Oldchurch was closed in the long term—I know that the new Government have announced a moratorium on hospital closures, which I welcome—that would have an enormous impact on east London.

My hon. Friends the new Members for Romford (Mrs. Gordon), who has long been involved in the campaign, for Upminster (Mr. Darvill) and I have fought to keep the hospital open. I also know that my hon. Friends the Members for Dagenham (Ms Church) and for Barking (Ms Hodge) have long been involved in that campaign. The closure of that hospital would have an enormous impact not only on Havering, the borough which I represent in Hornchurch, but on Newham, West Ham and many other London boroughs where the provision of health care is already a great problem.

The plan is to replace Oldchurch hospital with an accident and emergency department at Harold Wood hospital, which is far less accessible, particularly for people in the south of the constituency. Reaching Harold Wood hospital's A and E department would be difficult. It would involve a two to three-hour trip on public transport. It would be particularly difficult for older people, who might not have their own cars, and young mothers—there are many single mothers in my constituency.

The decision to close Oldchurch hospital was wrong in the first place, was mistaken and can be reversed. The new A and E department at Harold Wood will be built under the private finance initiative, which I regard as mistaken, but the PFI contracts have not been signed, so the plan can be reversed without any spending commitments having been given. We can reverse the closure of Oldchurch hospital, keep it open and continue to maintain a service to people in Hornchurch, Romford, Upminster and many other constituencies in east London.

12.10 pm

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Ann Taylor): This has been a somewhat unusual debate, not only because of the empty

Conservative Benches, but because of the many maiden speeches that have been made. I do not think that this three-hour Adjournment debate has ever been used for that purpose. It has been extremely useful and the time been well used by a wide range of Members, who have learnt quickly what opportunities can be provided in the House to those who want to raise issues affecting their constituents.

In particular, I congratulate my hon. Friends who had to start the debate, going in at the deep end without any experienced Members opening the way. I recall the relief of getting my maiden speech out of the way. Members who have spoken should be feeling not just relief, but much collective pride at the quality of their contributions. They have clearly shown the quality of debate that we can expect from new Members who entered at the last election.

May I say a few words about each of the issues that have been raised? I hope to be able to have time to deal with all of them today. The debate was opened by my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley, North (Mr. Cranston), who said that he wanted some change and reform in the House. Needless to say, I welcome that comment. We will be looking for some good ideas from new Members, who may not yet be bogged down in our old ways and therefore may not be as resistant to change as some of us who have been here for longer—although I am quite an enthusiast for change. I hope that we can have some support from new Members, and from old and new Members working together.

My hon. Friend showed that his work as a recorder is valuable experience, which he now brings to the House. I am sure that his background will be extremely helpful. He highlighted in particular drug and alcohol-related crime, and I am sure that what he has seen in practice will allow him to contribute to debates on those issues. I hope that we can use his expertise there.

The hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris) made a confident maiden speech and was very amusing on occasions. He gave some history of his constituency. It was the first that I had ever heard of railway signals being used to prevent people from voting, but we all learn, which is partly what these debates are about. With his background in the medical world, he was able to give us his informed concern; again, we will appreciate and listen to that in future. Giving us a full list of Oxford colleges was brave and I hope for his sake only that it was a complete list; otherwise, we will have to hear from him very quickly to repair any omissions.

The hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon was followed by my hon. Friend the Member for Chorley (Mr. Hoyle), whom I have known for some time. He mentioned his father, who was known to all of us in the House, but he failed to mention his and his father's connection with Bolton Wanderers. However, as that was put right by my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton, South-East (Dr. Iddon), I can forgive him that on this occasion.

My hon. Friend the Member for Chorley showed that he knew his constituency very well, having been born and brought up there and having worked there. He clearly knows the problems it faces and intends to be a strong voice on its behalf. He talked about the many difficulties that it has faced in recent years, not least because of the previous Government's inability to get the best out of the

European Union. I am sure that he will be lobbying new Ministers hard, and he proved today that he is prepared and able to do that.

The hon. Member for Southend, West (Mr. Amess) is not a new Member, but one of those Conservative Members who has changed constituencies. He is not in his place at the moment, but he dropped me a note to say that he had to go to a constituency engagement. I was going to say to him that I welcomed his comments on party funding. I hope that they will be consistent. The fact that he has raised the issue today shows, I hope, that he will support our desire to have a Nolan or a Nolan-type inquiry into party funding, and to change the rules in the not too distant future.

The hon. Member for Southend, West raised some specific points about the cockle industry in Leigh-on-Sea. I have an admission to make: I am not an expert on that industry, so I intend to ask the relevant Minister at the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food to write to him about those concerns.

I do know something about the situation in care homes and in the national health service. The comments of the hon. Member for Southend, West about blocked beds and the need for change were somewhat rich. He was pretending that a problem that has been there for many years had suddenly arisen in the past 18 days of the Labour Government and had never materialised in the 18 years of the Conservative Government. Again, I will pass his comments on to the Department, but he should have acknowledged that his own Government bore some responsibility for the problems about which he was complaining.

In her maiden speech, my hon. Friend the Member for Erewash (Liz Blackman) spoke about her constituents' concern—particularly, that they have lost out because of the previous Government's negative approach to Europe. She also used her own experience as a teacher to make some pertinent remarks about education, the need for consultation and the need for people in education to work in partnership. I welcomed her contribution on that. It is important that the House consists of Members with a wide range of experience. I am sure that she will have much to contribute in education debates. She said that, if her constituents were to prosper as individuals as well as a society, education had to be a priority. That is clearly a Government concern.

The hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr. Stunell) talked not only about the local problems of his constituency, but about the practical problems that some new Members face and that his party faces, having almost doubled in size in a short time. He said that he had a desk, an office and a telephone, although the telephone was not yet working. I have to issue a disclaimer to start with because those items are not a matter for the Leader of the House, but he is extremely fortunate. When most of us arrived as new Members, we were told not only that we should not expect an office too quickly, but that we should not even perch in the wrong places to use telephones. I was glad that one of my hon. Friends acknowledged the fact that the arrangements made by the House authorities this time have been far better and more helpful to new Members than ever before. The fact that we now have rooms with banks of telephones and information points is a remarkable breakthrough.

[Mrs. Ann Taylor]

The hon. Gentleman might be concerned about the difficulties, but I ask him to sympathise with those of us who experienced far greater difficulties. That does not mean, however, that things could not be improved. The scale of the changeover is so great that it has taken everyone by surprise. If the hon. Gentleman accurately predicted the result of the election, I wish that he had told the rest of us, because we might all have been better prepared.

My hon. Friend the Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes) talked about class sizes and the standard spending assessment for education, but also returned to an issue that he has mentioned many times—the need to improve electoral registration. It is something that he has brought to our attention many times by being a persistent Back Bencher and not letting the issue go.

I am glad that the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley, North and Sefton, East (Mr. Howarth), is here. I do not expect that my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Derbyshire will let Home Office Ministers off the hook, but I am sure that they will try to be responsive. Ministers might not take the precise path that my hon. Friend wishes, but I am sure that they will consider the problem and try to make improvements. All of us believe that improvements can be made.

While my hon. Friend the Minister is here, I must point out that my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Derbyshire also mentioned the need to revise the design of the ballot paper. As that is an issue of great concern to me following my experience of elections, I hope that I can lobby as well as Back Benchers. I pay tribute to the work of my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Derbyshire in highlighting the need for disabled people to have full and proper access to polling stations. It was partly due to the lead he gave before the last election that many of us were able to explore the problem in our own localities, and I hope and believe that some changes were made as a result.

We then heard a speech from the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath), who is a Liberal Democrat. He made a very confident contribution, and I am sure that we shall hear much more from him. He challenged us to be a reforming Government; I hope that we do not disappoint him. I am sure that he will continue to make valuable contributions to debates on education, the police and the environment, which he highlighted today, and that his constituents will be pleased that he has spoken so forcefully on their behalf. In passing, he sympathised with his predecessor for having three recounts. As someone who has a four-figure majority for the first time in five Parliaments, I sympathise with anyone who has to go through so many recounts.

My hon. Friend the Member for Rochdale (Lorna Fitzsimons) did not have as narrow a majority as I had when I started. She showed that she not only knows but understands her constituency but said one thing that I found very hard to accept. She said that she was a secret horn player. I am not sure that there can be such a thing as a secret horn player; perhaps she will tell us about that some other time. She proved that she is well qualified to follow what she described as the trend to have quirky

characters represent Rochdale. She is extremely competent, and I am sure that her bouncy contributions will be welcome in the House.

My hon. Friend the Member for Jarrow (Mr. Hepburn) also made his maiden speech. He began by saying that he wanted changes to the voting system in the House, and we can all sympathise with the delays involved. He went on to say what a good friend he was of his predecessor, Don Dixon. To those of us who have been promoting change in the House, there is a certain contradiction in my hon. Friend's two statements. I just hope that the friendship is not spoiled by my hon. Friend's contribution. However, I am sure that his sentiments about the need to campaign for jobs in Jarrow will be shared by his predecessor and appreciated by other hon. Members.

My hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Mr. Marsden) pointed out that he was only the third Member to hold his seat since the war. That is quite a record these days. I hope that he will be here for a very long time. He mentioned the House's lack of family-friendliness. I have been here for many years and have often been asked what impact having a lot of new women here will make, so I was glad that a man showed that it is not simply a female issue, but that we should all attempt to ensure that the House of Commons responds to everyone's needs, including all those with family responsibilities. I hope that we can take such issues on board when it comes to modernising the House.

I am sure that my hon. Friend's constituents will appreciate the concerns that he expressed about bovine spongiform encephalopathy and the need to reform the common agricultural policy. The Government are of course committed to that.

I have known my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton, South-East for more than 20 years. He might have mentioned Bolton Wanderers because he knew that it would elicit favourable comments from me. However, on this occasion he was not asking for anything, so perhaps he was right to save his comments for another occasion. He has been renowned for his knowledge of chemistry for many years. Indeed, my hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Mr. Sheerman) and I both have sons who have seen my hon. Friend's "The Magic of Chemistry" show. I hope that the House will find ways to use his expertise. He also demonstrated expertise in housing, and those of us who have known him for many years know that to be a genuine concern of his.

My hon. Friend the Member for Colne Valley (Ms Mountford) also made a maiden speech—one old friend of mine following another. She is also a near neighbour of mine in constituency terms. She made an excellent contribution, which I am sure her constituents will appreciate. I share her concern to ensure that young people get involved in the democratic process and understand how government and Parliament work. I also share her desire to see some movement on the issue of capital receipts, because we are all aware of the housing problems that many local authorities are facing and have faced for many years. I look forward to examining various issues with her in the House and in our constituencies for many years.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch (Mr. Cryer) had already made his maiden speech, so he used this occasion to raise an important constituency issue, which is a traditional use of such debates.

He showed his strong local knowledge. I understand why he is concerned about Oldchurch hospital. He also said that other colleagues shared his concern. I shall ensure that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health is aware of the problem. Although I do not share his views on the private finance initiative and its possibilities, I will ensure that the Minister replies to the details of the issues that he raised.

The purpose of debates on matters to be considered before an Adjournment is always to allow hon. Members to raise a wide range of issues, and that is what has happened in this debate. Several hon. Members have mentioned some common concerns, such as education, youth unemployment and crime. The fact that such common concerns have been expressed shows that the Government were on the right track when we determined our priorities for inclusion in the Labour manifesto and for action.

Today, in excellent speeches, new Members have expressed their concerns, and it augurs well for the House's future, as my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Derbyshire said, that hon. Members are willing to debate. I congratulate all the new Members who have made their maiden speeches in this debate.

Electoral Fraud

12.30 pm

Mr. Brian Sedgemore (Hackney, South and Shoreditch): I welcome you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to the Chair. I also welcome my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department to the Treasury Bench. I am sure that he will illuminate our debates with distinction.

I am pleased to have this opportunity to raise the issue of the conduct of elections, because, unhappily, electoral fraud and deceit are increasing. One form of fraud consists of candidates deliberately confusing the electorate by assigning titles to themselves on the ballot paper that are calculated to deceive voters.

In my own constituency, a man called Terry Betts referred to himself at the general election as the "New Labour" candidate. He was listed first on the ballot paper, whereas I—the official Labour candidate—was listed ninth. On election night, Betts apologised to me for—as he put it—"what happened today". I did not accept his apology, because I had not been the victim. The victims were the 2,000 electors who, because of the deliberate confusion caused by Betts, were denied the democratic right to vote for the candidate of their choice.

Betts described himself on the ballot paper as New Labour, so that voters would believe that he was the official Labour candidate and was supported by Tony Blair. The truth is that Betts was not a member of the Labour party and that he has never been a member of the Labour party. He was not supported by Tony Blair, and Tony Blair has never heard of Terry Betts.

On polling day, Mr. Betts was supported by Councillor Isaac Leibowitz—a man known to the Home Office—who drove around in a car with an audio system, shouting, "Vote Labour. Vote Betts." Last year, Councillor Leibowitz was expelled from the Labour party by Tony Blair.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order. When the hon. Gentleman mentions another hon. Member, he should refer to him as "the Prime Minister", for example, or as the hon. Member for a specific constituency.

Mr. Sedgemore: Mr. Deputy Speaker, the problem is that I am explaining events that occurred during the general election, when the Prime Minister was neither the Leader of the Opposition nor the Prime Minister—he was Mr. Tony Blair.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: He is now, however, the Prime Minister. The hon. Gentleman has sufficient experience in the House to know exactly how to deal with such matters.

Mr. Sedgemore: I will attempt to apply my brain to meeting your wishes, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Electoral fraud comes easily to Isaac Leibowitz. He is, indeed, a persistent electoral fraudster. Neither Hackney council nor its chief executive, however, has ever even admonished him for bringing the council into disrepute, contrary to the national code of conduct for local government councillors.

In 1994, in a local government election in the Northfields ward, Leibowitz engaged in a proxy voting scam. Although he was a Labour councillor, the scam was

[Mr. Sedgemore]

designed to help in the election of three Tory councillors and to prevent the election of a Labour Jewish woman named Denise Robson. There is incontrovertible evidence that, in that election, some people who voted were under age, that others voted twice and from different addresses, and that foreigners who were not entitled to vote did vote.

In 1996, in a by-election in South Defoe, Leibowitz set up a new political party, which, to deceive the electorate, he called the "Labor party". He fraudulently persuaded electors to sign his candidate's nomination papers, because electors believed that his candidate was the official Labour party candidate. Leibowitz then went "granny farming" for votes, by obtaining proxy votes from very elderly, housebound people who had lost their critical faculties and were incapable of exercising a choice. Only three weeks ago, he participated in the general election, in which he exercised his corrupt talents. In a press release, the so-called New Labour candidate said that he had the support of a group of local councillors, who masquerade under the title of Hackney New Labour. Last year, each and every one of those councillors was expelled from the Labour party by the Prime Minister. They have nothing to do with new Labour.

Hackney New Labour is led by an embittered, shambolic 76-year-old man named Gerry Ross. That so-called New Labour man is a former communist who supported Joe Stalin. From the beginning of his subsequent membership of the Labour party until his expulsion from it, he consistently proved to be a wrecker. In 1977, he was expelled from Hackney council's Labour group. Two years ago, he was forced out of the chairmanship of a Londonwide body, the London Committee for Accessible Transport, because no one could tolerate his behaviour. Last year, he was expelled from the Labour party by the Prime Minister. He now leads a group of political and electoral cheats, who are attempting to corrupt the democratic process in Hackney.

I am sure that the Minister anticipates one of the points that is worrying me—my fear that, in 1998, that bogus organisation, Hackney New Labour, will attempt to corrupt and pervert local elections in London and Hackney. I believe that action must be taken to stop that happening.

After the general election, I received reports of people suffering distress at every polling station because of confusion over who was the official Labour candidate—it was me. At one polling station, an old lady burst into tears and had to be consoled by my ex-wife after she realised her mistake. That old lady gets a vote only once every five years, and her day had been ruined. A man at another polling station, after realising his mistake, rushed back into the polling booth and called out: "Stop voting, everyone. You are voting for the wrong person." At that, three voters left the polling station, with their ballot papers, to ask people outside who was the official Labour candidate—all of which, obviously, was unlawful.

An old lady at yet another polling station, who realised that she had mistakenly put her cross against Betts's name, ate her ballot paper rather than placing it into the ballot box. In a long political career, people have done many things to come to my defence, but none of them had been so heroic as to eat their ballot paper.

After the general election, we have received hundreds of telephone calls from voters who felt that they had been deceived. Many people have asked me why the chief executive—Tony Elliston, who was the returning officer in charge—did not take action. That is a good question, because, on 17 April 1997—during the general election campaign—the Labour party's lawyers faxed Elliston a copy of a judgment in a similar case, in which a candidate who called himself a New Labour candidate was not the official Labour candidate. In that case, the judge ruled that what had occurred was

"a fraudulent device or contrivance which was intended to impede or prevent the free exercise of the franchise of electors within section 115(2)(b)".

Some senior and respected councillors have told me that they fear that the chief executive's indifference to electoral fraud may arise from questionably close relationships with the bogus members of Hackney New Labour. I will not comment on that, but it is something that Ministers may like to mull over.

What I can say with certainty—for a moment, I thought that I was on the wrong side of the Chamber—is that, when my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) complained to the chief executive about the appalling delay in sending out poll cards, he responded superciliously, saying: "We don't want to get them out too early, do we?" That was not the view of the electorate, thousands of whom did not receive their poll cards until the day before the election.

Whatever the truth about the bogus "New Labour" candidate Betts, Councillor Leibowitz, the chief executive and Hackney New Labour, the Minister will agree, I am sure, that working men and women fought long and hard to obtain the vote. Politicians and administrators should respect their right to vote for the candidate of their choice—indeed, they have a duty to do so. I fear that things will not be sorted out without the intervention of Home Office Ministers, and I look forward to a sympathetic reply from my hon. Friend the Minister.

12.40 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. George Howarth): I echo my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney, South and Shoreditch (Mr. Sedgemore) in congratulating you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, on filling that Chair. I know from experience that it is a job that you will do admirably and to the benefit of the whole House.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend for initiating this debate on a number of aspects of the conduct of parliamentary elections. I am especially grateful that he has raised the matter so soon after the general election. My hon. Friend has raised a number of points, the first of which is the cynical and misleading descriptions of some candidates on nomination papers and ballot papers, and the consequences that that has had in his constituency and elsewhere. The second point is the possibility of abuse of the absent voter arrangements.

Those are both important issues. Whatever other expertise we may have, the conduct of elections is dear to the hearts of all hon. Members. As the general election is so recent, it is even dearer than usual.

Both issues are important. I recognise that my hon. Friend has eloquently and wittily explained the problems that arise because candidates misdescribe themselves,

using party titles to which they have no right. That is indeed important. I am also pleased that the debate provides an opportunity to discuss spoiling tactics, which were not successful in my hon. Friend's constituency. In Knowsley, we have had long experience of candidates describing themselves as Labour candidates when they were not entitled to do so. My hon. Friend is right to say that it is far easier to cause confusion with such titles in local elections than it is in general elections.

I turn now to misleading descriptions on ballot papers. The provision that allows every candidate to include a description on his or her nomination paper is set out in the parliamentary election rules in schedule 1 to the Representation of the People Act 1983. No candidate is required to provide a description on the nomination paper, but, where he or she does so, the description as set out on the nomination paper is automatically transferred to the ballot paper.

The rules provide only that the description must not exceed six words and must be sufficient, with the candidate's other particulars, to identify him or her. Rightly, the description may not contravene the ordinary law of the land. It must not, for example, be obscene or racist, or act as an incitement to crime.

My hon. Friend has rightly said that responsibility for these matters rests with the returning officer. The 1983 Act places responsibility for the conduct of parliamentary elections on acting returning officers in each constituency. Acting returning officers, however, do not have the power to amend a candidate's nomination paper, and may reject a nomination only in two very particular circumstances. Those are that the candidate is disqualified because he or she is currently serving a sentence of imprisonment, or that the nomination paper is not as required by law and is not subscribed in due form.

The effect of the second part of the rules is that the acting returning officer can rule only on the validity of the nomination paper, and not on the validity of the person's nomination. It is here that the problem arises. The reason for limiting the acting returning officer's authority in this way is clear. Successive Governments have taken it as a first priority that acting returning officers should not be drawn into making decisions that might be considered political or party political. Every hon. Member will see the common sense in that.

I recognise my hon. Friend's concern that the use of misleading party names is a problem. The returns from the general election have still to be brought together, but I accept that the use of potentially misleading party names on ballot papers is likely to have increased from 1992. I am certain that, when we have a chance to analyse those returns, we shall see that that is the case.

Fortunately for the House and for my hon. Friend, the spoiling tactics used in his constituency did not have the desired outcome. Indeed, my hon. Friend is here today to tell us the story. As far as we know, the problem of misleading descriptions has not affected the outcome in any constituency in the general election. I know, however, that there is a strong argument that, in the 1994 European elections, the hon. Member for Torbay (Mr. Sanders) was affected. On a subsequent occasion, the hon. Member may raise that issue. In that election, the title "Literal Democrat" was used.

Mr. Mike Hancock (Portsmouth, South) indicated assent.

Mr. Howarth: I say to the hon. Member for Torbay—
[HON. MEMBERS: "He is not here."]

Mr. Andrew Stunell (Hazel Grove): My hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Mr. Sanders) is not here; I hope that the Minister is not under a misapprehension. He is right in asserting that there was a serious problem in the European election. The issue went to court, but was not resolved in the way that we would have hoped.

Mr. Howarth: I made a mistake. The hon. Member for Portsmouth, South (Mr. Hancock) was nodding so vigorously that I assumed that he was the hon. Member for Torbay. Obviously, he has been seduced by the power of my oratory, which was the cause of the problem. Clearly, a problem arose in the European election, and it is a matter that must be looked at in future.

Hon. Members will recognise that the problem of the attempted misdirection of the electorate has been with us for a long time. Descriptions were introduced specifically to address that problem. Many hon. Members will recall the days when there was no description on the ballot paper: I remember that being the case within my political lifetime. Descriptions were introduced to try to address the problem, but they clearly have not been as effective as we would have wished.

There are a number of options that do not require party registration, an issue to which I shall turn in a moment, and which have been looked at by Home Office officials. The various options include the use of party logos on ballot papers, the strengthening of the 1983 Act to provide a specific offence of using a description intended to mislead, and the introduction of a challenge process to be heard before a High Court judge. I know that the Liberal Democrats, in various submissions, have supported that.

There are difficulties with all three proposals, which need to be scrutinised in much greater detail. At this stage, I would not like to make a commitment to any of them. However, now that the election is over, discussion of the issues between the political parties will go ahead. I hope that we can examine them again to see whether there is any prospect of moving ahead, although I must add the qualification that there are problems with all three proposals that I have mentioned.

I should like to say a few words on political party registration, which offers us better prospects for dealing with the problems. The principal problem with the use of party names as candidate descriptions is that political parties are not recognised in electoral law. The lack of any means by which a political party can register its name for electoral purposes is the starting point for the difficulties that my hon. Friend has described.

From that stems the problem of a candidate being able to describe himself as new Labour when he has nothing to do with the Labour party or as a Literal Democrat when he has nothing to do with the Liberal Democrats, or, as has happened in my constituency, simply to use the confusing title "Labour", spelled properly. We have never been able to challenge that.

If she were free to do so, my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Jane Kennedy) could wax lyrical for at least 15 minutes on the confusion that often

[Mr. Howarth]

exists at elections in Liverpool, where various candidates use all kinds of different descriptions, trying to pretend that they are Labour party candidates when they are not.

We have to make progress on this. The lack of statutory registration of political parties has consequences for party funding. My right hon. Friend the Leader of the House mentioned our commitment to look into that. The registration of political parties would have to be part of any mechanism for bringing party funding under control. If we have any kind of proportional system—an issue that will be considered, and should be the subject of a referendum, during this Parliament—we shall have to consider party registration.

My hon. Friend is aware of our manifesto commitment to examine ways of regulating and reforming the funding of political parties—a commitment that we take seriously. We also have a clear manifesto commitment to put to the Scottish and Welsh people proposals for the devolution of powers to representative bodies elected by proportional representation.

The Government are considering how best to take forward those commitments. The answer will, without doubt, involve a measure for the registration of political parties, although it is too early to be able to say yet what that may involve. Any measures to register political parties would provide an opportunity for action on the statutory recognition of political party names. We shall certainly have to examine that issue.

My hon. Friend also talked about granny farming—the first time that I have come across the term. That is not a bizarre agricultural practice, as it might sound, but a specific problem to do with proxy votes. The Government take seriously any allegations of widespread and systematic abuse of the procedure for absent voting. If it becomes necessary, we are prepared to legislate.

There is no recent evidence that the abuse of proxy voting is systematic or widespread. Application forms for absent votes were amended in 1994, after well-publicised examples of elderly people being deliberately misled into believing that they were applying for a postal ballot paper, which would have allowed them to cast their own vote, rather than a proxy to vote on their behalf. Electors now have to indicate clearly whether they are applying to vote by post or by proxy. All appointments of a proxy must be signed by the elector or by the proxy.

Under the Representation of the People Act 1985, an elector who is unable to vote in person at the polling station may apply to vote by post or by proxy. Those wishing to vote by proxy are required to give the name and address of the person appointed as proxy, and must sign the proxy appointment or arrange for it to be signed by the proxy.

The review of electoral law and practice set up after the 1992 general election considered whether changes should be made to the absent voting system and to the application forms, to reduce the opportunity for abuse of the system and to make it more accessible to voters. Various suggestions were considered, including the redesign of the form, the need for the elector to sign in person, the wording on the ballot papers and the inclusion of the level of fines. The application forms were amended in 1994.

In the past five years, there have been allegations of absent voting irregularities in St. Ives in 1992, in Brighton in 1993, in Burnley in 1994 and in Cynon Valley in 1995. Various actions resulted from those allegations, some of which were upheld. The offences in Cynon Valley led to a member of Plaid Cymru being tried in Cardiff Crown court and sentenced to two months in prison.

There have been no reports, either officially from an acting returning officer or from newspapers, of abuses in connection with absent vote applications at the 1997 election, although I am sure that my hon. Friend's speech will remedy that defect. Any allegations of malpractice regarding the absent voting system should be reported to the police, whose job it is to investigate.

A person who votes as some other person—in person or by means of a postal or proxy vote—commits an offence of personation, which is a corrupt practice under the Representation of the People Acts. A person is also guilty of a corrupt practice if

"by abduction, duress, or any fraudulent device or contrivance he impedes or prevents the free exercise of the franchise of an elector."

I am not sure how that applies to swallowing a ballot paper, but we should investigate that.

A person who makes a false statement in an application for an absent vote, or who attests an application that he knows to contain a false statement, also commits an offence, as does anybody attesting an application when not qualified to do so. Electoral abuse is a serious matter. There are strict penalties for those found guilty, with a maximum fine of £5,000.

My hon. Friend has raised some important issues, and I congratulate him. It is right that such issues should be aired as early as possible in the electoral cycle, so that we have time to review and consider them and take any necessary action. If I have missed any points from my hon. Friend's speech, I shall pick them up and communicate with him.

Part of the task that the Government have set themselves is to clean up politics in this country. The issues raised today fall within the scope of that aim. Subject to proper consultation, we shall act to clean up politics and to make the electoral system as free of defects as possible.

Gangmasters (South Lincolnshire)

12.59 pm

Sir Richard Body (Boston and Skegness): I congratulate you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, on your election. I shall try not to trespass on your patience too often. I also congratulate the hon. Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr (Mr. Rooker) on his appointment to a Department with which I have had a love-hate relationship for many years. I hope that he will enjoy his time there and play an active part in reforming the common agricultural policy.

A large proportion of our vegetables is produced in south Lincolnshire. As it is a seasonal industry, there is an obvious need for casual labour on a considerable scale. Many thousands of men and women are engaged in harvesting the vegetables and, increasingly, in processing them in factories. To give the Minister an idea of the scale, one factory requires more than 2,000 men and women to work on a casual basis most days of the year.

Obviously it is necessary to organise many thousands of people into the various farms and factories where they are required. That is the role of the gangmaster, who enters into an agreement with the farmer or factory manager to organise a certain number of people for a certain number of days. The gangmaster receives a lump sum and it is up to him or her to pay the gangers what he or she thinks fit.

There is nothing inherently wrong with the system. It worked very well for a long time, until unemployment took off and more than 1 million people in south Lincolnshire became available for casual work. They come from as far afield as Sheffield, Doncaster, Grimsby, Mansfield and even Birmingham. The people who recruit them are different from those who previously undertook such work. According to the Department for Education and Employment, there are now about 800 gangmasters, who fall into two categories. The first comprises those whose names, addresses and telephone numbers can be found in the Yellow Pages or the telephone directory. They can be easily identified by Government Departments and, generally speaking, they engage local people. They often employ their friends, relations and neighbours. They depend on having a good reputation, and over the years they have tried to do an honest job. If they were not honest to their friends and neighbours, they would not have gangs. However, their position has become almost untenable because of the other category of gangmasters who are in the vast majority—there are only about 50 or 60 in the Yellow Pages—many of whom have criminal records and continue to commit acts of dishonesty and violence.

There is such fear among the gangers that it is impossible for me to recount the experience of any ganger. One honest gangmaster who provided me with information was warned not to speak to me again. He was told that, if he did, he would be punished. He ignored that threat and gave me more evidence about the criminal activities of the other gangmasters. Having done that, he was punished. The other gangmasters took a puppy that he had recently acquired for his family and cut off its paws. Needless to say, he has given me no more information. Indeed, none of the honest gangmasters is willing to be forthcoming about the activities of the others.

We are dealing with people who have a disdain for the law of our country and do not hesitate to use some pretty bad methods of recruiting gangers and to treat them badly. I shall not go into detail about what goes on in the fields and the factories, but there are many cruel and obscene practices that cannot be justified.

This state of affairs has continued since unemployment rose, making it possible for disreputable gangmasters to recruit men and women who have been on social security and are willing to come to Lincolnshire, often making a long journey in transport provided by the gangmasters. Many of them get up at 4 o'clock in the morning to earn a miserable rate of pay.

The result is unfair competition. Wages are almost the only variable cost in producing and processing vegetables. Farms and factories that can reduce their wage costs can hold down their prices. As the Minister knows only too well, about five major supermarket chains are competing with each other and trying to keep down prices, with the result that at the end of the chain gangers are working at a derisory rate of pay.

The position has become worse in the past 12 months. Not only are gangmasters recruiting people who are on social security, but they have agents in eastern Europe—in Poland, the Ukraine and even Russia—who are bringing illegal immigrants to Britain. I cannot say how many there are, but it is certainly an appreciable number. Those people are told that, if they come to England, they can earn as much in one day as they get in one week in their own country, and that is true.

A number of evils are being committed. Apart from illegal immigration, there is massive social security fraud. One cannot quantify the millions of pounds that have been lost, but one sub-postmaster in my constituency has calculated that, even in his area, it must cost the system about £500,000 a year. Fraud is being perpetrated on the Inland Revenue and on Customs and Excise, but, above all, there has been a great depressing effect on wage rates in my constituency. It means that men and women in my constituency are better off on social security than doing a reasonable job. Only their self-respect enables people to continue working in appalling conditions as gangers on the farms and in the factories.

I feel sure that the Minister will be persuaded that action must be taken. The previous Government took a number of steps, none of which has succeeded. In the past, gangmasters were licensed, but licensing came to an end when there was full employment. There was no need for any control over gangmasters as, on the whole, the system worked successfully. However, the position has now completely changed and I can think of no solution other than a return to licensing.

The Minister may know that I introduced a Bill for the licensing of gangmasters. Up to now, I have not revealed that it was drafted for me by an official of the Transport and General Workers Union; I therefore hope that the Bill will be treated more sympathetically if I reintroduce it. If the Government cannot support such a measure, I urge them to think of taking some steps to overcome the evil to which I have referred. The previous Government tried; they took a number of steps, but they all failed. I urge the Minister to reconsider licensing.

1.9 pm

The Minister of State, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Jeff Rooker): I should first associate myself with the comments of my colleagues on the Treasury Bench and other hon. Members in congratulating you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, on your appointment as the First Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means. Having served under you in Committee, I know that you will serve the House in your onerous task with distinction. We understand the great sacrifice that you, as a Member of Parliament, have made in order to fill the post that must be filled. We are therefore doubly grateful to you and your colleagues in the Chair for taking on such an awesome responsibility.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Sir R. Body) on taking this early opportunity to raise an issue that over the years I have been an hon. Member—not as many years as him—he has raised many times. I have occasionally been present when he has raised the issue during Question Time as well as in a ten-minute Bill. Since I knew that he had obtained this debate, I took the opportunity over the past 24 hours to check in *Hansard* the written questions that he has tabled on the matter. He comes to the issue with a long and dedicated experience of concern for his constituents.

I hope that the issue is not partisan in any way. It is one of fairness and of justice for our citizens who work in the agricultural and farming industry. I share the concerns expressed. If unscrupulous people are at work—the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness painted a very sorry tale of the production of food in Britain—they must be rooted out, and rooted out vigorously.

As the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness rightly said, agriculture and horticulture depend on a large number of casual or seasonal workers. Many years ago—longer than I care to remember—I did a couple of weeks of fruit picking up in Scotland. I understand the concerns and why the job is highly seasonal. I understand that, during some weeks, up to 14,000 people a day are employed on a casual basis to pick food. The task obviously needs to be done that way.

As the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness also rightly said, it is astonishing to learn—I have seen some of the newspaper advertisements—that, due to high levels of mass unemployment, especially in urban areas, which has gone on for a decade or more, people have been bussed into the Lincolnshire fields from as far afield as my own city of Birmingham. I shall return to that matter.

The organisation of employees by gangmasters is not, as the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness said, inherently bad. Gangmasters must—we will ensure that they do—operate within the law. The law must be enforced without exception. There is therefore a need to look at the legal framework. I shall spend a few minutes detailing some aspects of it, before I turn to more positive remarks.

A range of legislation regulates the employment of workers by gangmasters. All agricultural workers must be paid the appropriate minimum wage. Agricultural work is the only area in which there is a statutory minimum wage for each hour of work.

Ms Gillian Merron (Lincoln): Does my hon. Friend agree that many of the problems associated with pay, to which the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Sir R. Body) referred, would be alleviated by the introduction of a national minimum wage, especially since in my constituency and throughout Lincolnshire workers earn on average £40 a week less than is earned by the average British worker?

Mr. Rooker: I congratulate my hon. Friend on her election to the House. I campaigned for a national minimum wage when we last had a Labour Government, so I understand the difficulties and the need for it. Agriculture and horticulture is the one area with a statutory national minimum wage regulated by law and approved by the House, yet the law can be flouted in the extreme, as my hon. Friend and the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness have highlighted.

The national minimum wage in agriculture applies regardless of whether people are employed directly by a farmer, a gangmaster or a contractor. It applies to everyone who works on the farm, including those undertaking packhouse activities for crops grown on that farm. Provisions for people working away from the farm are slightly different. People on piece-work are sometimes told by gangmasters that the minimum wage does not apply to them. They are lying; the minimum wage does apply to such workers and they must not be paid less than the overall minimum required for the hours that they work.

Enforcement of minimum wage legislation is, of course, conducted through the criminal courts. One of the snags, however, is that we as enforcers have only six months after the event to take effective action in court. That presents a serious practical problem. I shall highlight one example of that.

As Channel 4's recent programme "A Bitter Harvest" highlighted—I have not seen the programme, but I have read the transcript and reports—someone may spend months researching a matter. Months therefore elapse before all the activities are recorded, produced and shown on television. That can cause problems for the regulators in rooting out perpetrators of events shown on our television screens. My officials are considering all aspects of that programme and enforcers across the Departments are considering whether any action can be taken as a result of the events highlighted in the film. We may be caught by the fact that the events took place more than six months ago. I do not deny that difficulty.

Other problems in enforcement relate to lack of records of hours worked or payment received. Workers are sometimes unwilling to be witnesses. Given that good gangmasters cease to be witnesses due to threats of intimidation from thugs and spivs, we should consider how workers feel when they want to complain. It is absolutely impossible for them to do so for fear of intimidation.

Gangmasters are subject to other legal provisions. Gangmasters supplying workers to work under the direction of farmers are subject to the Employment Agencies Act 1973, and the penalties for infringement are

harsh. The Department of Trade and Industry must follow up complaints. In the worst cases, offenders may have to cease operations as an employment agency or business for up to 10 years.

Gangmasters are also expected to comply with relevant tax and national insurance legislation. I know that my colleagues in the Department of Social Security will be looking at that. The agricultural compliance unit in the Inland Revenue was set up to ensure that taxes and national insurance are collected. That is one angle of enforcement. There are also provisions to prevent the harbouring and use of illegal immigrants. Enforcement can lead to the deportation of illegal workers or the imprisonment of operators. I would certainly support the latter as the first priority. It is the one way of stamping out that activity.

The use of illegal immigrants presents all kinds of opportunities for the exploitation of workers because of lack of knowledge of the English language and a fear of complaining. Such workers can be kept in appalling accommodation. Indeed, as we have seen recently, casuals employed by gangmasters can, over several weeks, end up owing gangmasters money, because gangmasters charge for transport and, perhaps, accommodation. We, in 1997, almost have tied labour in this country, since the longer such workers work, the more they owe the employer. That is outrageous and we must take every possible step to rule it out.

There are proper arrangements for seasonal workers under the seasonal agricultural workers scheme, which of course allows foreign workers into the United Kingdom to undertake agricultural work. Such practice is quite normal. Up to 10,000 young foreign, non-European economic area workers may come into the UK to undertake work for up to six months between May and November—the key season of the year.

A single operator may at the same time commit offences against each of the several disparate legal requirements. Such requirements are regulated by more than one Department, and there are therefore difficulties. There have clearly been difficulties in the past, which I hope my colleagues and I can eliminate in future.

The hon. Member for Boston and Skegness highlighted the fact that abuse of the law can be tempting to people who are in receipt of social security benefit. They can go into work that is not subsequently declared. Pressure of mass unemployment in urban areas has caused that. The hon. Gentleman is right to say that, if the abuse occurs widely—which it does in his experience in Lincolnshire—the effect on the local rural economy and on the level of wages for the indigenous population is catastrophic. That has a knock-on effect and leads to rural deprivation on a grand scale. I represent an urban area, but I understand that our rural areas are not like the pictures on the front of chocolate boxes. In 1990, I made a speech from the Opposition Back Benches about rural deprivation. I understand that the problem can be as serious as in the inner cities; however, because it is more disparate and diffused, it is not highlighted in the same way.

Sir Richard Body: On the subject of enforcement, and given that more than 700 cowboy gangmasters operate in urban areas and elsewhere, how can the Government identify and monitor them? They are fly-by-night

characters who act as gangmasters for a couple of months, make a lot of money and disappear on holiday or to prison.

Mr. Rooker: The hon. Gentleman is right and the Government must address the issue. Local task forces of enforcement agencies are set up to tackle the problems. They can involve the police, together with enforcement officers from the immigration and nationality directorate, the Department for Education and Employment, the Department of Social Security and the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. The focus must be to catch the operators, and we need to consider what more can be done.

All the produce ends up on the shelves of our shops and supermarkets, so the food sector has a responsibility. The great supermarket chains are sensitive to bad publicity when they are accused of exploiting workers in the third world. The hon. Member for Boston and Skegness has described third-world conditions for the people who work on the land and the local population in Lincolnshire. Those who buy from the farmers have a responsibility to ensure that farmers use good gangmasters and not spiv gangmasters. I will ensure that the food industry addresses that issue.

Sir Richard Body: It has failed so far.

Mr. Rooker: Yes, but we have a new broom and a fresh mandate. Our instincts are different and we want to solve the problem. The British Retail Consortium has approached the National Farmers Union about the introduction of a code of practice to control the activities of gangmasters. I am in favour of codes of practice, but I will review every code of practice issued by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food to ensure that they do not undermine the regulations approved by the House. Codes of practice can be of benefit, but they can be used to avoid enforcement.

The NFU issues guidance already to farmers on the employment of casual labour. Not every farmer is a member of the NFU, and we must try to reach those non-members too. The NFU has also set up a working party that is addressing the issue of gangmasters more directly. It will propose a code of practice and the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food will comment on that.

There are many anecdotes about abuse of the system. The hon. Member for Boston and Skegness has given hard evidence of such abuse, but it is always difficult to provide that hard evidence in a court of law. Legislation is available to deal with the problem, but the question is whether it is being used. I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for highlighting the issue in the early days of this Parliament. The problems caused by some gangmasters have long been known, but the nature of gangmasters has changed. We must examine whether the existing legislation covers the new type of gangmaster.

As a first step, I will consider the existing laws and whether they meet the current situation. I will ensure that they are enforced in as concerted a manner as possible. Voluntary codes of practice may have a role

[Mr. Rooker]

to play. The issue reached my desk only in the past 24 hours, but I will also inquire why the old gangmaster licensing system was abandoned in 1951. People then had prospects of full employment and nobody envisaged people being bussed from Birmingham, Manchester and Wolverhampton to the fields of Lincolnshire. The problem of the exploitation of illegal immigrants and people from eastern Europe was also non-existent. Harvesting was a family and community affair to get food into our shops.

I will give the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness a commitment that I will discuss the matter further with my ministerial colleagues in the Home Office, the Department for Education and Employment, the Department of Trade and Industry, the Department of Social Security and the Inland Revenue. When I have concluded those discussions, and—I hope—found a way forward, I will be in touch with the hon. Gentleman. I am grateful to him for requesting this debate.

Mr. Peter Windass

1.25 pm

Mr. Hugh Bayley (City of York): I start by thanking Madam Speaker for permitting me to raise the subject of this Adjournment debate.

Over the past three years, I have corresponded with several Government Departments and executive agencies on behalf of my constituent, Mrs. Moira Windass, whose son, Peter Windass, was murdered in York in January 1994. That correspondence reveals serious shortcomings in the criminal justice system. It also reveals an inability on the part of Ministers to give accurate answers to clear, factual questions about the operation of the criminal justice system. I would have liked to put some questions to the Ministers concerned in an Adjournment debate, but I was prevented from doing so by the sub judice rule. I do not hold the present Minister responsible for the actions of the previous Government, but I was anxious to have this debate because I want the new Government to consider the administration of the criminal justice system and to improve it.

Peter Windass was a young man with his whole life ahead of him. He was an honest, upstanding and hard-working person; a qualified stonemason who worked on repairing and restoring York's city walls. When he died in January three years ago, it was as a result of an unprovoked attack. His attackers were arrested by the police within 24 hours. One has subsequently been convicted of murder and another of affray. From the point of view of the criminal justice system, it might appear that the case was dealt with satisfactorily. The crime has been solved, the criminals have been convicted and both have been sentenced to prison. However, from the point of view of the victim's family, the conduct of the case was far from satisfactory. The way that it has dragged on has prolonged and intensified their anguish.

It is impossible to describe the pain endured by the family of a murder victim. The family's feelings should be the primary concern of a criminal justice system. Instead, their feelings, questions and needs are treated as almost incidental to the judicial process. The family received good support from friends and voluntary bodies, including the Victim Support scheme in York, and from the police, but the courts appeared distant. The members of the family had to mingle in court with witnesses appearing for the defence, including people they knew from their neighbourhood who were threatening to them.

Various promises were made to the family by different parts of the justice system, but they were not kept. For example, the police promised them that they would be told of the date on which one of the accused would be sentenced, so that they could be in court to hear the sentence passed. That did not happen.

The justice process itself is painfully slow. My choice of the word "painfully" is careful. I do not use it as a figure of speech. I mean that the slowness causes pain for victims' families. It is almost three years since the murderer was convicted, yet still the tariff—the time that he will have to serve in prison—has not been confirmed, so the case has not ended. The family are still waiting to find out what penalty will be imposed on the man who murdered their son.

When justice is delayed, justice is denied. We need a justice system which, while allowing a defendant his rights in court, does not unnecessarily prolong proceedings.

When the family asked questions about the case, the answers they received from different parts of the justice system were sometimes contradictory and sometimes simply wrong. The police did not know what the Crown Prosecution Service was doing. The CPS and the Court Service were at sixes and sevens. The Court Service, the Prison Service and the probation service failed to work together, so the family received different answers to their questions from different parts of the system.

The criminal justice system has become fragmented. The problem is faced not by the Windass family alone, in one isolated case, but by many families of the victims of murder and manslaughter. Since the murder of her son, Mrs. Windass has played a prominent part in a voluntary body called SAMM—Support After Murder and Manslaughter. She knows that what happened to her family is, unfortunately, all too common.

We need a better co-ordinated criminal justice system, and I can give a few examples that illustrate that need. First, I wrote to Baroness Blatch, the former Minister at the Home Office, about the failure of the system to advise the family of the date of sentencing. The family were promised that they would be notified by a police officer, but that did not happen.

The Baroness replied:

"It has never been a Crown Prosecution Service function to inform the police of new hearing dates in the Crown Court."

Well, that should be a Crown Prosecution Service function, and the CPS should also have to tell the victim—or in the case of murder or manslaughter, the victim's family—the dates of new hearings.

Secondly, at the time of the murder, one of the two accused, a man called Eaves, was supposed to be under curfew in Blackburn as a result of bail conditions imposed for a string of other offences. In a letter to me dated April 1995, another former Home Office Minister, the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean), said that Eaves's bail was subject to four conditions, one of which was that he had to report regularly to the police in Blackburn.

In January 1996 the former Minister retracted that statement, saying that Eaves was not on bail but subject to an arrest warrant, and that the bail conditions before he absconded and the arrest warrant was issued did not stipulate that he should report to Blackburn police.

I raised that matter with the chief constable of Lancashire, and it turned out that the bail conditions applied had required Eaves to report to the police. The chief constable wrote to me:

"The bail conditions were initially imposed by Blackburn Magistrates' Court on 1st October 1993"—

about three months before the murder.

"The Police are informed, routinely, by the Courts of any bail conditions. However, there are insufficient Police resources to individually monitor whether or not someone is residing at a particular address or complying with curfew conditions."

If a court imposes bail conditions to protect the public from a violent or potentially violent offender, we need to ensure that those conditions are met and enforced. Indeed, we must first ensure that the conditions are enforceable.

I have a third example. Eaves has a long record of repeatedly breaking bail conditions and absconding while on bail, yet when, part way through the criminal proceedings against him, the charge against him was reduced from one of murder to one of affray, the court offered him bail again, despite objections by both the police and the victim's family. Eaves was granted bail again, and he absconded again.

In a letter to me dated April 1995, the former Minister, the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border—whom I have told I would raise the matter in the House today—said:

"The Government is determined to see that the courts grant bail only in those circumstances where it is safe to do so".

That policy is right, but in Eaves's case it was not applied. He had absconded from bail on the night that the murder was committed.

In the same letter, the right hon. Gentleman said that Eaves

"will be appearing at Preston Crown Court in due course when he will be sentenced. Under amendments to the Criminal Justice Act 1991, when deciding what sentence to pass on Eaves, the court will have to take into consideration the fact that the offence was committed on bail as a factor aggravating the seriousness of the offence."

Quite right too—but when Eaves was sentenced, the judge was not informed that the offence was committed when he had absconded while on bail, so the penalty that he suffered, the prison sentence, did not take account of the aggravating factor that the Minister had said would be recognised.

It is hardly surprising that the family feel let down by the criminal justice system. Moreover, the former Government's mishandling of their changes to the Criminal Injuries Compensation Board regulations meant that, on top of everything else, the family lost out on compensation payments. They received funeral expenses only. I shall write to my hon. Friend the new Minister separately about that matter, because it has undoubtedly compounded the family's feeling that the justice system was working against them.

I believe that the criminal justice system needs radical change, and I have four specific proposals for the Minister. First, the Crown Prosecution Service should have a duty to keep the victim—or, in the case of murder, the victim's family—informed about the progress of criminal proceedings.

Secondly, the CPS should co-ordinate its proceedings better with those of the police. I should like an assurance from my hon. Friend that the Labour party's election manifesto proposal, that the Crown Prosecution Service should appoint a dedicated senior prosecutor attached to each police force, will address those two problems—the duty to keep the victim informed, and co-ordination between the police and the prosecution service.

Thirdly, tighter bail rules need to be introduced. If imposed by a court, a residential restriction to a particular address or a curfew at a particular time of day need to be enforceable and enforced. If they are not, there is no point in making them.

Fourthly, the Government must do everything they can, within the constraints of ensuring due process, to speed up the justice system. I find it intolerable that a year after the judge recommended a tariff, that tariff has still not been confirmed. Of course the convicted man should have

[Mr. Hugh Bayley]

a right to make representations before the tariff is set, but the system should not allow the perpetrator of a crime to drag out the agony for the victim or the family for a further year. In this case, I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister can give an assurance that the tariff will be set as soon as possible.

In general, we need a new approach to the criminal justice system which puts the victim at its heart. I ask the House one very simple question—if the criminal justice system does not seek to provide justice for the victim of a crime, who then does it provide justice for?

1.41 pm

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Alun Michael): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for City of York (Mr. Bayley) on initiating an important debate on this general area of policy and, particularly, the family to whom he has referred. Only those who have lost a loved one at the hands of a murderer can begin to understand the pain and grief suffered by bereaved families. The impact can affect not only the immediate family, but friends, colleagues and neighbours. For all too many, the repercussions can last for the rest of their lives.

No one could fail to have enormous sympathy for families who are bereaved in such a sudden and violent way, and I wish to take this opportunity to express my sincerest sympathy to Mrs. Windass, who is following the debate today. My hon. Friend has illustrated the experience of many other families. Many families of murder victims—and many other victims of crime—feel neglected by the criminal justice system and a great deal more needs to be done to meet their needs.

I can assure the House that this Government will take action to redress the balance of the criminal justice system in favour of victims, while maintaining the interests of justice. We will ensure that all agencies give a high priority to treating victims with sensitivity and respect, and will listen to their views to improve the services they provide to victims and their families.

The Government want to ensure that victims are kept fully informed of progress in their case—one of the central issues raised by my hon. Friend—if they want to be. Victims of crime must be kept informed of significant developments in their case and should have the opportunity to explain the effect the crime has had on them.

Pilot studies are now under way in six police force areas; the police will keep victims informed of developments. This will be extended to two more areas shortly and will provide, in effect, a one-stop-shop pilot project. However, the idea that victims who want to know what is happening can look to the police to keep them informed is only one option. We will carefully examine the outcome of the pilot exercises, but we believe that this task should not be left to the police alone.

In respect of the reform of the Crown Prosecution Service, I am happy to confirm the steps we are taking. My right hon. and learned Friend the Attorney-General and my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary regard this as an important reform. Our plans to decentralise the CPS will enhance co-operation between local Crown prosecutors and the police. The new local CPS should be more involved in informing victims of its decisions.

Specifically, local Crown prosecutors, who will be in post under our reorganisation, will be accountable for their decisions and should be prepared to explain to victims their reasons for discontinuing or downgrading charges against offenders—at least in the most serious cases.

My hon. Friend says that it should be the responsibility of the CPS to keep families informed. That is a fair point. In 1994, I tabled amendments to the Criminal Justice and Public Order Bill to place that requirement on the CPS, but they were not accepted by the then Government.

We also want local Crown prosecutors to be more proactive in meeting victims and witnesses—especially in cases where people have been killed as the result of a crime—to explain their decision on prosecution. The concern of families is shown by the fact that requests to meet the CPS are increasing in number; I am assured that no request is refused. Our plans to decentralise the CPS should achieve even greater responsiveness to the needs of victims of crime and their families.

The enforcement of bail conditions was another important matter that my hon. Friend referred to. It is not an easy one to deal with, as he will appreciate. In view of the serious series of events he described, I am happy to give him an undertaking to look into the circumstances surrounding the bail decisions to which he referred. There are cases where things go badly wrong, and that is why we want to improve the enforcement and oversight of bail conditions.

My hon. Friend referred also to the criminal injuries compensation scheme. I believe that this is one of a number of matters that fall between two stools. The House will recall that the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard)—the previous Home Secretary—introduced a new scheme, which was challenged and had to be withdrawn. He then had to replace it with a second new scheme, which was introduced and debated in the House. I assure my hon. Friend that I will look at the situation and take advice as to whether there are steps that can be taken to alleviate the problem. Again it is complicated, but I will look into it carefully to see what can be done.

It is clear that the families of homicide victims need assistance because of the deep distress caused by the tragic event. It is now common practice for police forces to appoint one officer on the investigation team as a family liaison officer. The victim's family will be given that officer's name and telephone number and the officer will be responsible for answering any questions the family may have about the case and for keeping them informed of developments throughout the police investigation and any subsequent court proceedings. This includes the progress and outcome of Court of Appeal cases—a point to which I shall return—where the police will tell the family quickly of the date of the appeal, if the offender is granted bail pending the appeal and, of course, the outcome, when it is known. Obviously that will not be a perfect system as, in some cases, the police do not have the information to pass on. We must tighten the procedures and we will build on best practice so that best practice becomes the norm. We will keep the matter under review.

An information pack is now available for the families of murder victims. The police will offer the families a copy of the pack, which was developed by the Home Office, to help anyone bereaved as the result of a crime.

The information pack contains practical information to help the family and friends of the victim, both in the immediate aftermath of the crime and in the longer term. All police forces have copies of the pack, which will be monitored to ensure that no family is left out. Again, we will keep this under review.

As well as receiving information about case progress, it is right that the victims should have the opportunity to explain how the crime has affected them. It is easy to forget that all crime is about the victims and that that is what the process is about. Ways of doing so are being tested in the pilot project.

As hon. Members will appreciate, giving people the chance to make a formal statement about how the crime has affected them raises a number of sensitive issues, which we will need to consider carefully when we evaluate the pilot study. Furthermore, when the victim has been killed, the issue of who should be allowed to make a victim statement as a secondary victim needs further careful thought. In some cases, it will be obvious that the position is not clear cut. In the case of homicide, the majority of victims—54 per cent. of males and 73 per cent. of females—knew the suspect before they were killed and 40 per cent. of females were killed by current and former partners. In such cases, the relatives' views would form part of their case for leniency and it would be far from obvious who was the right person, if anyone, to offer the contrary view as a secondary victim.

The complication of these issues should not and will not stop us engaging in them, but I am sure that my hon. Friend will accept that there is no simple, straightforward way to deal with them immediately.

My hon. Friend made a number of serious points about the setting of the tariff and the period taken to reach that conclusion. He is right to point out that it is more than three years since the murder and more than two since conviction, yet the tariff has not been set for the life sentence. That is another common area of concern to the families of murder victims.

In every case in which a person is convicted of murder and sentenced to life imprisonment, the family of the victim have the right to know what tariff has been set—the minimum period to be served in prison for the purpose of retribution and deterrence. A decision on the tariff, however, has to await the outcome of any appeal to the Court of Appeal in case the conviction is quashed or the appeal sheds new light on the offence. Since the appeal process can be lengthy, it may indeed be many months after sentence before the tariff is set and the victim's family can be told. That is the general situation.

I understand that in Peter Windass's case, the Prison Service is awaiting representations from his killer's solicitors about the tariff. When those are received, Ministers will be able to set a tariff. I can assure my hon. Friend that Mrs. Windass will be informed of the outcome as soon as possible after that. I can go a little further, as officials are pressing solicitors for the representations to be made as quickly as possible and today I have discussed ways in which we can speed up the process of advising relatives about the progress of appeals and that of setting the tariff.

Clearly, improvements can be made. For instance, in this case it appeared that the dismissal of an appeal heard by a single judge was going to be followed by an appeal to a full court—leave was given for that second appeal.

The fact that that was dropped after 14 days was not picked up until much later. Clearly that added to the delay in providing information to the family. That is the type of gap and difficulty in the process that we will tighten up.

Mr. Bayley: I am grateful to hear my hon. Friend's commitment that he will speed up the process in this case. I would also be grateful if he would ask the solicitors how long the court has been waiting for representations from the murderer's solicitors and consider the more general point of whether that is longer than is necessary to ensure a fair opportunity.

Mr. Michael: Certainly I will be happy to consider that when I study the circumstances. I was pointing out that there has been a gap in our being kept informed. We have found out why it happened and will try to use that knowledge to learn lessons and ensure that it does not happen again.

On mentally disordered offenders, the arrangements for the probation service to keep victims and their families informed of post-sentence developments do not apply to victims of offenders who are sent to hospital. That does not apply in this case, so I will leave that matter to one side, but I have flagged it up as another area of concern.

Victims of crime and their families do not merely need timely information about their case and to have their views taken into account; they also deserve appropriate support to help meet their practical and emotional needs, whether or not their case goes to court. My hon. Friend tells me that Victim Support was helpful to the family in this case, although I must stress that it is no substitute for sensitive support and help from every part of the criminal justice system.

The Home Office provides substantial funding to Victim Support nationally, which provides practical help and emotional support to victims of all types of crime. Our grant this year is £11.7 million, which will support the work of about 365 local schemes and branches nationwide. The grant also supports the work of the Crown court witness service, which has been established at all 77 Crown court centres in England and Wales to help victims, witnesses and their families cope with the stress of a court appearance.

Victim Support is working closely with another organisation, Support After Murder and Manslaughter—known as SAMM—to which my hon. Friend referred, to improve and develop services to the families of murder victims. The network of self-help groups throughout the country puts bereaved families in touch with each other and allows them to share their anguish and their anger, to talk to someone who has been in the same situation and to gain strength from knowing that they are not alone in their grief. As my hon. Friend said, Mrs. Windass is a member of its executive committee and is using her experience to help others. That sort of mutual support and understanding is perhaps as helpful as anything else in enabling families to come to terms with what has happened and I pay tribute to those like her who turn their tragedy and misery into a springboard for helping others.

Through our grant to Victim Support, the Home Office has provided funds to help run the SAMM office located at Victim Support's national office in London. I am sure that the association between the two organisations will enable Victim Support and SAMM to develop and improve further the services that they offer to families bereaved by violence.

[Mr. Michael]

We are also committed to ensuring that the courts become much more sensitive to the needs and interests of victims and witnesses through better facilities, information, support services and separate prosecution and defence waiting facilities wherever possible. Some progress has already been made. The court users charter explains the standards of service that victims and witnesses can expect from the Court Service. The victims charter sets out clearly 27 standards of service that victims should be able to expect from all the criminal justice agencies, including the courts, and explains which agency provides each service and how victims can complain if they do not get the level of service promised. Shortly, we plan to issue a revised version of the Home Office "Witness in Court" leaflet, which explains to victims and witnesses what happens at court.

All those changes will help, but central to the needs of victims and families is their wish to see justice done. People such as Mrs. Windass know from their experiences the deep truth in the saying that justice delayed is justice denied. No one can have a monopoly on the feelings or needs of families of murder victims; every situation is different, each family will respond differently to the devastating tragedy, but all of us have the same goal—to try to meet the needs of those families in the best way possible, whatever they are.

The Government accept that the current situation is not perfect and that improvements can be made. We will work with the criminal justice agencies, Victim Support, SAMM and other support groups to improve the service that victims and their families get from the criminal

justice system. We will speed up justice, as our manifesto commitments made clear. We will start with youth justice, halving the time that it takes to get young offenders to court and establishing a fast-track system for the persistent young offenders who cause so much chaos and devastation in communities throughout the land. We must tackle violence in our society, bearing in mind the fact that the number of violent crimes increased by more than 11 per cent. last year alone and is 166 per cent. higher than it was in 1979. We must nip things in the bud when things start to go wrong. We must improve consistency and progression in sentencing, to tackle the scandal exposed by my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary when we were in opposition.

That is the background against which I can assure my hon. Friend that we will take action on the issues and concerns that he has raised in this short debate today. I am sure that he will be interested to know that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary, when speaking to the Police Federation at its annual conference today, will also be setting out a vision of the future and ways in which we intend to tackle and improve the operation of the criminal justice system, in the interests of victims, the communities that have been damaged by crime and those who have felt the scourge of violent crime in recent years.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising a series of extremely important issues and I look forward to dealing with them in practical terms in the coming months.

It being Two o'clock, the motion for the Adjournment of the House lapsed, without Question put.

Sitting suspended, pursuant to Standing Order No. 10 (Wednesday sittings), till half-past Two o'clock.

Oral Answers to Questions

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Great Lakes Region

1. Mr. Ainger: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what further assistance her Department plans to provide in the Great Lakes region of Africa; and if she will make a statement. [310]

The Secretary of State for International Development (Clare Short): I should explain that the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley (Mr. Foulkes), is at a meeting of the Caribbean development bank, so I am here on my own today.

Since 1993, the United Kingdom has committed £178 million—bilaterally and through the European Union—to help the people of the Great Lakes region to survive. The population desperately need peace and security to rebuild their lives. We hope to work constructively with Mr. Kabila's new Administration, with other Governments in the region and with international partners to try to secure stability and sustained economic and social development in the region.

Mr. Ainger: I thank my right hon. Friend for that reply. May I be the first formally to congratulate her on her richly deserved appointment? Does my right hon. Friend welcome, as I do, the establishment of a new Government in the Democratic Republic of the Congo? What plans does she have to assist that Government to establish democracy and rebuild the economy? What plans does she have to assist the Government of Rwanda to ensure that there are speedy and fair trials of those accused of genocide?

Clare Short: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his generous remarks.

The fall of the Mobutu regime in the Congo—as it now is again—is a fantastically important opportunity for Africa and for the long-suffering people of Zaire. An Administration in Kinshasa committed to respect for human rights and national consensus in transition to representative and elected government will be an enormously important step forward for the region.

Tomorrow I shall discuss with Vice-President Kagame of Rwanda the way in which we can work together to secure that aim, and next week I shall meet ex-President Nyerere. We all want to work with the new Government, and if they will respect human rights, we will work together with the whole international community to bring economic and social development to that very important part of Africa.

It is also important that the Rwandan refugees return home, that there should be proper trials for those accused of genocide and that human rights are protected so that the people of Rwanda can also look forward to social development in a more stable and peaceful future. Again, we shall do everything in our power to work in partnership with the Government of Rwanda to achieve that aim, constantly stressing to them that respect for human rights is crucial to further progress for their country.

Third-world Debt

2. Mr. Mullin: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what recent discussions she has had regarding the reduction of third-world debt; and if she will make a statement. [311]

Clare Short: I had an encouraging meeting with the president of the World bank last week. The Government strongly support the heavily indebted poor countries initiative and are pressing for its speedy implementation. Our aim is to produce tangible results quickly for the most needy countries and to bring about a once and for all exit from their debt problems.

Mr. Mullin: I welcome my right hon. Friend to one of the best jobs in the Government and I am sure that she will do it well. Has she given consideration to persuading her colleagues at the Treasury unilaterally to remit some of the debt owed to the Export Credits Guarantee Department by some of the most indebted countries, and will she make any relaxation of indebtedness conditional upon respect for human rights?

Clare Short: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. To be fair, the previous Administration worked hard in their later years to achieve success on debt cancellation. Britain's record on cancelling debt owed bilaterally is very good, but we cannot make further progress without getting partnerships across the international community. It is important that we get momentum behind the initiative and start to make progress.

Uganda has been named as the first candidate to exit from debt, and Britain has volunteered to make an extra payment to make up for the fact that the African development bank is not in a position to make its payment. The previous Administration made that clear, and we are standing by that commitment. We hope that other Governments will work similarly. Once we get progress and success, I believe that the initiative can be built upon and that we can begin to give some of the neediest countries in the world the chance to work their way out of poverty.

Mr. Menzies Campbell: I, too, offer my congratulations to the right hon. Lady. She has a warm heart and an independent spirit. I suspect that she will need both qualities, not least in dealing with the Chancellor of the Exchequer. Does she agree that it is disappointing that only Uganda has entered the framework set down for the highly indebted poor countries by the International Monetary Fund and the World bank last year, and that Uganda will be eligible for debt relief only in 1998? What practical steps can be taken to maintain the momentum to which the right hon. Lady referred? Is she satisfied that the criteria laid down in the heavily indebted poor countries initiative are wide enough to allow the most rapid entry of as many countries as possible into its framework?

Clare Short: I am grateful to the hon. and learned Gentleman for his kind remarks. He is right that we should like more rapid progress, but we have to take partner countries with us. Not all countries are as persuaded of the need to make progress as Britain is.

Uganda has been named, and there is preliminary agreement on the eligibility of three other countries—Bolivia, Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire.

I have discussed the matter with my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer, who is anxious to show what a warm heart he has on this matter, and we shall do everything in our power to ensure that rapid progress is made. Any support, suggestions or help from any part of the House on ways in which we can achieve that outcome will be welcome.

Dr. Fox: I, too, unreservedly welcome the right hon. Lady to her post. We should pay tribute to the Leader of the Opposition and the shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer for their work on debt reduction. I was pleased to hear the right hon. Lady's fine words on the heavily indebted poor countries initiative and to know that the Chancellor of the Exchequer has a warm heart on the matter. However, a warm heart will not reduce debt. How much do the Government intend to make available for the initiative? They said that they would make money available when they were in opposition.

Clare Short: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his kind remarks. I have already paid unreserved tribute to the former Chancellor of the Exchequer. As the hon. Gentleman knows, Uganda is first and Britain is committed to making additional payments because the African development bank is not in a position to pay its share. We cannot say exactly what the amount will be until the calculations are made, but Britain is in advance of other countries. We are determined to make progress on Uganda and very keen for our partners to make the same sort of commitments. We shall do all in our power to make fast progress.

It is in the interests of justice, and of the whole world, that we should deal with the desperate poverty entrenched by debt. In sub-Saharan Africa, 40 per cent. of people live in poverty. We shall make no progress until we deal with debt.

Kenya

3. Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on aid projects that the United Kingdom is currently funding in Kenya. [312]

Clare Short: Within the context of the overall policy review that I am conducting, I intend to concentrate our aid programme on improving the access of the poor to essential health services and basic education, and on finding ways to increase the incomes of smallholder farmers and the urban poor.

Mr. Cox: I warmly congratulate my right hon. Friend on her appointment and I welcome her reply. Will she discuss with the Kenyan authorities two issues which cry out for urgent action? The first is the plight of street children and their horrendous suffering. The second is the substantial increase in the number of people with AIDS. Will my right hon. Friend urgently consider helping on those two issues with advice and, if possible, with financial aid?

Clare Short: Britain is a large donor in Kenya and, potentially, can attempt to use its influence. Developments

in Kenya are worrying and patchy. There has been a deterioration in the level of primary education and a growth in the level of poverty. As my hon. Friend said, the problem of AIDS is also very serious. We are reviewing all our spending and commitments so as to concentrate on those in greatest need. The two groups in Kenya to whom my hon. Friend referred are obviously in great need.

Mr. Brooke: It is a pleasure to see the Secretary of State in her place. May I ask her whether the aid programme is funding the secondary education in Kenya of any refugees from southern Sudan where secondary education is in turmoil?

Clare Short: I am afraid that I do not know the answer to the right hon. Gentleman's question, but I will find out and write to him.

Aid and Trade Provision

4. Mr. Wareing: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what plans she has to carry out a review of the aid and trade provision. [313]

Clare Short: As I have said, we are reviewing all our expenditure programmes. I am determined to concentrate our efforts on poverty eradication. This means that we are necessarily reviewing the aid and trade provision.

Mr. Wareing: I congratulate my right hon. Friend on her appointment and I am reassured by her answer. During any review, will she consider the recommendations made by the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs during the last Parliament when it looked into the Pergau scandal? Most of the ATP aid was being focused by the Tory Government on Indonesia and China—two countries which do not have the best human rights records. Among the developing countries, Indonesia is the sixth largest recipient of direct foreign investment. How could the Tory Government have justified concentrating 17 per cent. of ATP aid on that country? I am sure that my right hon. Friend will agree that we should be directing that aid towards the poorest peoples in the world.

Clare Short: During the review we shall, of course, take account of the Foreign Affairs Select Committee report. I share my hon. Friend's concerns and I am reviewing our aid programme to Indonesia. Many people argue that the aid and trade provision does not meet either development or commercial objectives very well. We want absolutely to concentrate all our efforts and all our resources on the eradication of poverty. That means that we must look seriously at the way in which the aid and trade provision has pulled our aid spend in a different direction.

Mr. Wilkinson: In greeting the Secretary of State at the Dispatch Box, I welcome her review of Britain's overseas aid programme, particularly the review of the aid and trade provision that she has announced. Will she focus much more on the aid and trade provision to the mutual benefit of British industry and commerce and the recipient countries, thereby enhancing political and commercial connections between them while at the same time diminishing Britain's contribution to the European

Union's aid programme, which is not nearly so well targeted as the British one and is often wasteful and misapplied?

Clare Short: As I have said, we are reviewing the aid and trade provision, but perhaps our thinking goes in a slightly different direction from that of the hon. Gentleman. The aid programme is not about the promotion of commercial opportunities. That is an important objective of Government policy, but the aid programme should be part of a bigger strategy for eliminating abject poverty in the world. That is in the long-term interests of everyone and, indeed, of commercial activity. If there is less poverty, there will be more commerce.

On European Union aid, the hon. Gentleman will know that it was his Government who, in Edinburgh, made an agreement which meant that up to 40 per cent. of our aid spend should go through the EU and unfortunately I have inherited that. The hon. Gentleman is right to say that the performance of EU aid is patchy and I shall be doing everything in my power to use our influence in the EU to try to get the concentration on poverty eradication in EU spending in the same way as we want to achieve that from our own aid spending.

Child Labour

5. Mr. Canavan: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what steps she is taking to stop the exploitation of child labour in third-world countries. [314]

Clare Short: The tragedy of child labour, bad though it is, is not just the current exploitation of children but the fact that they are deprived of education, which will blight their lives permanently. We intend to strengthen our support for the International Labour Organisation's efforts in the developing countries to eliminate hazardous and exploitative child labour. Promoting universal primary education—an achievable objective throughout the world if the world community decided that it wished to achieve it—is a crucial part of the solution.

Mr. Canavan: I congratulate my right hon. Friend on her appointment. Last week Christian Aid published a report on the exploitation of children in the manufacture of sports goods. An Indian child as young as seven receives just 12p for hand-stitching an Eric Cantona football which retails in Britain at £9.99. Will my right hon. Friend appeal to all sports stars, sports clubs and the sports industry to co-operate with Governments, non-governmental organisations and the International Labour Organisation to phase out the exploitation of child labour and to introduce, where appropriate, special development measures to protect family income and children's rights to health and education?

Clare Short: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. The Christian Aid report was very useful and we welcome it strongly and applaud the publicity accrued on this serious issue. I am also grateful to my hon. Friend for not calling for an immediate boycott of the goods involved. People who are concerned about child labour often do that, but it can lead to the children being thrown into an even worse

situation in which they have to live as beggars on the streets or are even forced into prostitution. We need the type of partnerships that my hon. Friend suggested.

We should like sports firms and others who find that the products that they buy are produced by child labour to use their influence to press our Government, the companies involved and Governments in developing countries to plan the phasing out of child labour. In many countries, parents cannot find work, but children are employed. In this respect, the history of our own country is an experience on which we can draw. There must be regulation to phase out child labour and ensure that children are in education, where they belong, so that they have brighter prospects.

Sir John Stanley: Will the right hon. Lady focus particularly on the evil of bonded labour in those countries where it is still rife? Such labour is the 20th-century equivalent of slavery, and children especially suffer from it.

Clare Short: The right hon. Gentleman is right. Bonded labour is a scourge of the world. As he says, it is akin to slavery and we shall take action on it. I believe that we should take whatever action we can, in co-operation with other Governments.

The proposal for a human rights clause in the World Trade Organisation so that no country can obtain access to the most privileged terms of trade unless it guarantees the right of labour to organise and that there will be no child labour and no bonded labour is one of the ways forward for the world. We shall join with the American Government and others in supporting that call, which will provide a long-term solution.

In the meantime, we shall take what action we can, wherever we can.

Mr. Corbyn: I congratulate my right hon. Friend on her appointment as Secretary of State and I welcome what she has just said. Is she prepared to use the Government's influence on the World Trade Organisation to ensure that all future trade negotiations and trade strategies which are agreed will include a specific commitment to full recognition of all ILO conditions by all signatory states, as a major part of ending the disgraceful exploitation of children and ensuring decent rights for all workers in developing countries?

Clare Short: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. We consider that the pressure for a human rights clause in the World Trade Organisation is crucial, not only to make progress on child labour but to prevent the globalisation of the world economy leading to the pushing down of standards across the world. Minimum conditions that all countries are required to meet before they obtain access to the most privileged terms of trade will provide a platform for everyone across the world. It is a very important change and we shall do all that we can to achieve it.

Aid Target

6. Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development when she expects the

Government to meet the United Nations target of 0.7 per cent. of gross national product in their contribution to overseas aid; and if she will make a statement. [315]

9. Mr. Luff: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development when she estimates that spending on overseas aid will reach the target of 0.7 per cent. of gross domestic product. [318]

Clare Short: We remain committed to the 0.7 per cent. United Nations aid target and to reversing the decline in United Kingdom spending. As we said during the election campaign, however, we shall work within existing ceilings this year and next. I am currently reviewing expenditure plans and putting in place a coherent strategy to tackle global poverty, which will be published in the White Paper promised in the Queen's Speech. As we demonstrate progress, additional resources will be made available.

Mr. Baker: I welcome the right hon. Lady to her position and congratulate her on her strong commitment to and understanding of development issues. Does she share my concern that this country now contributes just 0.28 per cent. of GDP in overseas aid compared with 0.51 per cent. in 1979? The rich in this country have had tax cuts, but the poor in many countries have lacked basic food and shelter.

Given the right hon. Lady's strong commitment, is she capable of persuading her colleagues—particularly the Chancellor of the Exchequer—to ensure that, despite the stringent financial conditions that he has imposed on the Cabinet, sufficient funds will be made available to meet the United Nations target of 0.7 per cent.? Will she set a time scale for that?

Clare Short: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right: Labour's record on aid is a proud one—we reached 0.51 per cent. of GDP and rising towards the target. The Conservative Government, who so rightly have lost office, left us with a contribution of 0.27 per cent. of GDP—even worse than the figure that the hon. Gentleman gave.

We need a higher aid spend, but we need to spend our aid money better. We need coherence across all our policies on debt, at the International Monetary Fund, the World bank, the European Union and the Lomé renegotiations. In that way, we can focus our efforts on the measurable eradication of poverty.

While I can hardly change the Department's aid spend this year—although I can do so at the margins—because it takes so long to work up sensible and strong projects, I am busy working to redirect our energies next year. It is in the year after that, however, that I shall need more resources because we shall have plans in place to spend the money properly. I hope and intend that that will be so.

Mr. Luff: In adding my voice to the general welcome that has been extended to the right hon. Lady in her new role, may I ask if I am right in interpreting her previous answer by suggesting that while the Chancellor of the Exchequer may or may not have a warm heart, he is most unlikely to have an open purse? If those are the circumstances that she faces, can she give any clearer indication of how she will make the aid spend more effective?

Clare Short: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, but I thought that I had been talking about that for some

considerable time this afternoon. Too much of the current aid spend goes on projects which are worth while in themselves but are not focused on the eradication of poverty. I am very supportive of the plans outlined in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development Assistance Committee report, which stated that the world should set itself targets including that of halving world poverty by the year 2015. All the donor countries would then work in partnership with developing countries to reach measurable progress.

If we work in such a way, we may then begin to believe that in the new millennium we shall see the end of abject poverty in the world. Currently, poverty affects one in four people. The aid spend is an important part of that plan, but it must be based within strategies which deliver progress; otherwise, money may be spent on good causes, but we shall not reach progress.

My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer cares very deeply about that agenda and I am extremely optimistic that he and I will work beneficially together to get the progress that we want.

Mr. Cunliffe: Will my right hon. Friend assure Labour Members that a Labour Government will never repeat the cut imposed by the Tory Chancellor in his Budget this year, when he reduced overseas aid by £180 million? That deliberate cut imposed untold hardship and misery on hundreds of thousands of African and Asian families so that the price of gin and whisky in this country could be reduced by 27p. Such was the motive behind that attempt at general election popularity.

Clare Short: The Conservative party fought the election on a commitment to move to an aid spend of 0.7 per cent. of GDP, but year upon year the Conservative Government cut the aid budget. As I said earlier, they also gave up to 40 per cent. of our spend to the EU and thus lost control of it. Their record is poor. We fought the election on a commitment to halt the decline and to increase the aid spend and we intend to keep all our manifesto commitments.

Dr. Godman: When my right hon. Friend conducts her expenditure review, will she examine closely the way in which Brussels officials manage the know-how and PHARE funds? In terms of devolution, surely Britain's contributions to the funds should be managed by my right hon. Friend and her Department.

Clare Short: The know-how fund is managed from Britain by my Department, with the Foreign Office co-operating. The PHARE fund is a European Union programme; it therefore has to be managed differently, but it should be complementary. The spending on that fund, like that on all other funds, must be reviewed to make it more effective than under the previous Administration.

Dr. Fox: The Secretary of State was correct when she said that we need to spend all our money better. Is she aware that Oxfam says that 19 water tanks, providing 28,500 people with 10 litres of clean water a day, could have been provided through our aid budget for the absurd cost of the Foreign Secretary's glitzy presentation of the mission statement? Was that money well spent?

Clare Short: I have to say that that is an extremely cheap point—[*Interruption.*] The hon. Gentleman served

as a Minister in a Government who have just been booted out of office and who consistently cut, cut and cut the aid budget to give tax cuts to their wealthy friends. The new Administration will ensure that our aid spending eradicates poverty as effectively as possible, but it is also our duty to announce the priorities of our foreign policy—and that is what my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs did.

Africa

7. Mr. Purchase: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what are her priorities in respect of Africa. [316]

Clare Short: I aim to work in partnership with African Governments—what we need is not donor countries telling other countries what to do, but partnerships—and with international institutions on strategies to eliminate poverty through sustainable economic and social development. That will be underpinned through support for good governance and human rights. Priority will be given to programmes which help the poorest people in Africa. As I have said, we intend to outline our strategy in the promised White Paper.

Mr. Purchase: I add my voice to those welcoming my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to her post and wish her well in that work. She will bring a refreshing change to it.

Does my right hon. Friend agree that the resolution of the conflict in southern Africa is a considerable priority and that it is important to support the efforts of the South African Government and, in particular, President Mandela in his current efforts to bring peace and to resolve that conflict? In so doing, we shall lift out of poverty many of the millions of people who have had conflict heaped on them in circumstances of dire poverty, leading to a worsening of the situation almost beyond human comprehension.

Clare Short: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: poverty often leads to war, which just worsens the cycle. Africa has suffered gravely, but there are grounds for optimism. The absolute decline in its economy has been turned around. Governments such as Uganda, Ghana, Ethiopia and Eritrea are doing well. The change of regime in the Congo could be an enormous opportunity for progress. That would also help to resolve the situation in Angola. There is now a real opportunity for Africa, and we must work in partnership with those Governments to make progress.

Mr. Soames: I warmly welcome the right hon. Lady to her post. Although there can be optimism at recent developments in Africa, does she agree that one of the major priorities should be a move towards better government among some of the countries to which we give aid? Will she assure the House that she will use the ability as a donor Government to insist on better practice by many Governments in Africa, linked to aid?

Clare Short: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. The needy people of Africa need good governance so that there can be partnerships with developed countries and real progress can be made. We shall use all our influence

to try to achieve that aim. The beauty now is that Africa has its own examples of good governance and success, such as Uganda and Ghana, which means that there is the chance of a home-grown African model spreading to others. So yes—we shall do that and there are real opportunities now.

Rain Forests

8. Mr. Jack: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what steps she plans to take to ensure that the United Kingdom's international development policies contribute to the preservation of the world's rain forests. [317]

Clare Short: My Department has 200 forestry projects under way in 41 countries at a total cost of £200 million.

At the UN General Assembly special session on environment and development in June, which I hope to attend with my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, we shall work to secure more effective international action to improve forest management.

Mr. Jack: I thank the right hon. Lady for her very comprehensive answer. Is she aware of the tremendous support being given by a range of British companies to a rain forest protection programme in Guyana undertaken by the Amerindians, using modern technology to publicise worldwide the threat to their rain forests? One of the industrial partners in that project is British Telecom. If British Telecom is affected by the windfall tax and has to reduce its expenditure on that project, will the right hon. Lady undertake to lobby the Chancellor of the Exchequer to safeguard that vital rainfall—wind forest—rain forest protection plan?

Clare Short: I am not sure whether I heard the right hon. Gentleman correctly—is he advocating a rainfall tax? I am very disappointed in him: questions about the future of the world and its poorest people and the future of the rain forests are important to the whole of humanity and should not be used to make cheap political points.

PRIME MINISTER

Madam Speaker: Before I call the hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Mr. Taylor), I remind the House of the new method of handling engagements questions. The Member with the first such question should call out the number of his or her question in the normal way. After the Prime Minister has described his engagements, that Member will be asked to put a supplementary question. For the second and subsequent engagements questions, the Members who tabled the question should not call out the number of the question but simply put their supplementary question as soon as I call their name. Members with substantive questions on the Order Paper should, of course, continue to call the number of the question.

Engagements

Q1. Mr. Ian Taylor: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 21 May. [340]

The Prime Minister (Mr. Tony Blair): I have had various meetings with Ministers today to discuss the

implementation of our election pledges. I will have various meetings later, in particular in relation to young people and skills. In addition, I have attended a meeting of the Labour party's national executive.

Mr. Taylor: I warmly welcome the Prime Minister to his role of answering questions and I am grateful to him for finding the time in his diary to do so. At some point he might consult the House about these changes. I also wish him well in dealing with the massed ranks of his own Back Benchers as they lose their political virginity.

Will the Prime Minister agree today to compensate pensioners for any damage done to pension funds as a result of the windfall tax and changes in advance corporation tax which he might propose?

The Prime Minister: I first have to say yes, indeed, we have had a busy day because this Government, unlike the last Government, are governing in the interests of the people of this country. Secondly, the windfall tax will not harm pensioners at all. What did, however, harm pensioners was the last Government's imposition of VAT on fuel. It is precisely for that reason that we propose cutting it.

Ms Corston: It is an honour to be called during the Prime Minister's first Question Time to make a serious attempt to question the Prime Minister. Given that at present only one crime in 50 leads to a conviction, does my right hon. Friend recognise the need for effective measures to prevent crime as well as a criminal justice system in which the public can have confidence? Will he tell us what measures the Government will take to prevent crime?

The Prime Minister: Certainly I shall. My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Indeed, today my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary is announcing a series of measures that I hope will have a beneficial effect on cutting crime. He is of course announcing first, that we say that children between the ages of 10 and 13 are able to tell the difference between right and wrong and the law should be changed in that respect. Secondly, we are going to halve the amount of time it takes to get persistent juvenile offenders to court. Thirdly, he has announced a review of the entire youth justice system. Much of the behaviour of some young tearaways and thugs makes life hell for people. We are committed to taking action and again, unlike the previous Administration, action we will take.

Q2. Mr. Swinney: Will the Prime Minister tell the House whether the Government will argue for a zonal lifting of the European beef ban? If they will, will he outline a time scale within which we can expect the lifting to occur? Will he also guarantee that the beef ban will be lifted in Scotland at the same time as it is lifted in Northern Ireland? [341]

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that we are in negotiations with the European Commission and with our European partners to try to get the best possible deal on lifting the beef ban. One part of lifting the ban, of course, is a certified herd scheme. It is important not only that we apply that scheme in Northern Ireland, which has a traceability scheme, but that we discover how we can lift the ban in other parts of the United Kingdom.

I should tell the House that the BSE situation that the Government have inherited is quite appalling, and not only because of its expense. The way in which the negotiations were handled was a disgrace, and it will take some time to sort out the situation. The early indications, however, are that we are able to get a far better deal than the previous Government. We shall do everything that we possibly can, in the interests not only of the farming industry but of Britain's good standing abroad.

Mr. Stephen Twigg: Is the Prime Minister aware of widespread public concern about the growth of drug abuse in the United Kingdom? Over the past decade, there has been a fivefold increase in the number of drug offences. Will he provide an outline of the Government's plans to deal with the drugs crisis?

The Prime Minister: Yes. As my hon. Friend may know, we are committed to proper testing and treatment for all offenders who have a drugs problem. Additionally, however—as we announced before the general election—we will appoint one individual, whom we will call the drug tsar, who will co-ordinate all aspects of the fight against drug abuse and the link between drug abuse and crime. In many parts of the United Kingdom, as much as 50 per cent.—possibly more—of crimes are linked to drug abuse. It is absolutely essential that we bear down on every single aspect of the problem. By putting one person—who will be responsible to the Home Secretary—in charge of all aspects of co-ordinating Government policy on the problem, we believe that we will give ourselves a far better chance of dealing with that evil in our midst.

Mr. Ashdown: May I, first, welcome the Prime Minister's attempt to find a new format for Prime Minister's Question Time? Such an attempt was undoubtedly too bold for some, but the Prime Minister's efforts will have been worth it if we find a format that is a little less confrontational and a little more rational.

Is it still the Government's intention, in the next two years, to spend not a penny more on education than the Conservative Government whom they defeated?

The Prime Minister: First, I am delighted to hear the right hon. Gentleman's welcome for the change in the format of Prime Minister's questions. I hope that, in time, it will prove to be for the benefit of all hon. Members.

There are differences on education spending between ourselves and the previous Government. The first important difference is that we will phase out the assisted places scheme and reduce class sizes for all five, six and seven-year-olds. Secondly, the nursery voucher scheme will, rightly, be replaced by proper nursery education for our children. Thirdly, the windfall tax will have some impact on the skills and training part of the education budget, helping young people back into work through better skills and training.

Mr. Ashdown: The Prime Minister knows that the figures that Ministers quote on the abolition of assisted places do not add up. Even if they did, however, surely it is true that the Government will not deliver next year, and that they may deliver very little in the subsequent year. Therefore, are not the consequences of the Government's policy that teachers who were to be sacked because of

Conservative policies will be sacked, that class sizes that were to rise next autumn will rise, and that the serious situation in books and equipment facing schools this winter because of Conservative policies will not get better under a Labour Government, and may even get worse?

The Prime Minister: No; I do not accept that. Reducing class sizes will be achieved partly by employing extra teachers. The right hon. Gentleman said that the figures do not add up, but they were checked by the National Foundation for Educational Research, which found that they added up, and even that there was money to spare. It is very important to understand that the vast majority of people—parents who use the state education system—understand that it will take time to put things right. It will take time, because of what we have inherited. Those people now know that they have a Government who have the right values, who are committed to the state education system and who, over time, will improve the system, as we have promised to do.

Mr. Stuart Bell: Having fought the general election on a platform of no hundred days of dynamic action—the definition of dynamic action changing from one Prime Minister to another—having introduced a Queen's Speech with 26 Bills, much to the delight of the public, having made the Bank of England independent, having severed supervision of the banking system from the Bank of England and having introduced a new system of regulation for the City of London, can the Prime Minister tell the House what he proposes as an encore?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. It is, of course, important that we start to make a difference in the areas where the people of this country elected us to make a difference—in our schools, in rebuilding our national health service, in giving hope to our young people and in the measures, as my hon. Friend rightly says, in relation to the Bank of England. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor took decisive action at the very beginning and he is to be congratulated on that. It is far better now that we take the politics out of setting interest rates and that we do not play politics with people's mortgages. As the National Association of Estate Agents said just the other day, in the long term that will lead to lower mortgage rates and, therefore, to a better deal for home owners.

Mr. Major: In view of the apparent confusion in briefings from Ministers over recent days, will the right hon. Gentleman tell the House which companies and which classes of companies are likely to be liable to the windfall tax? Will he also please explain to the House why the chairman of British Telecom apparently felt that his company would not be liable?

The Prime Minister: I heard what the chairman of British Telecom said the other day and I was delighted that he indicated that he had the good judgment to vote Labour in the general election. The idea, however, that the chairman of British Telecom or anyone else was in any doubt that we intended to introduce a windfall tax is rather hard to believe. As the right hon. Gentleman knows because we have said this many times, the actual companies will be decided by the Chancellor in accordance with precedent, which is to make any moves

in relation to the Budget in the Budget. That is the proper way in which to do it. The companies and the amount of the windfall tax will be decided by my right hon. Friend in the normal way.

Mr. Major: Sir Iain seems to be rather regretting his vote already, but I will let that pass for the moment. I find it surprising that the House of Commons is to be the last to be told who will be liable to the tax in view of the private briefings that are going on. Perhaps the right hon. Gentleman can confirm to the House that no one acting in his capacity or no one from the Labour party when in opposition gave any indication, clearly or in terms of a nod and a wink, that British Telecom would not be included in the tax. Can the Prime Minister be categorical about that please?

The Prime Minister: I certainly can be categorical. Everybody has known that the decisions on who—whether British Telecom or anyone else—will be liable for the windfall tax will be taken by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor in the normal way. It is perfectly obvious that that should be the case. Prior to the Budget, it would be wholly wrong if my right hon. Friend announced the companies or the amounts of the windfall tax. In following that precedent we are following precisely what the previous Conservative Government did in relation to the windfall tax on banks.

Mr. Major: The House will note that the right hon. Gentleman replied in the generality but did not reply specifically. He did not provide the House with the categorical assurance I asked him for; perhaps he will do so in just a moment. If the tax proceeds, it will lead to an extra tax on gas, water, electricity and telephones. I return to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Esher and Walton (Mr. Taylor). If the tax gives rise to an increase in bills for many people on low incomes, will the right hon. Gentleman follow the precedent set by the previous Government and increase social security benefits to compensate for that? Will the right hon. Gentleman accept that if he does not, the populist tax on fat cats he proposes will be a tax that hits most those who have least?

The Prime Minister: I shall resist the temptation to say that that was the soundbite, because I have a feeling that I used to use a few of those myself at one time. No, that is not the case. There is a cap on prices. Some of the regulators have already said that they would not consider it right for the windfall tax to lead to any increase in prices.

The reason for introducing the windfall tax is clear. There is no doubt that vast excess profits were made. There is also no doubt that it is essential that we give hope and opportunity to those hundreds of thousands of young people at present without them in our society. There will be a great deal of agreement, not just among those who do not have opportunity, but even among those who are perfectly well off, that if we do not tackle the problems of a growing underclass of people cut off from society's mainstream without any chance of a job, with poor educational opportunities, without the chance to do well in life, we shall end up, as the previous Government did, paying more and more in welfare bills and having less and less for future investment.

Mr. Bermingham: May I make a simple plea to my right hon. Friend on behalf of St. Helens, which is an

industrial town? Perhaps he could find time to have a word in the ear of the Chancellor of the Exchequer and suggest to him that, if slanted towards encouraging investment in industry, the June Budget would undoubtedly help our manufacturing base—for home consumption and overseas exports—and thus the welfare of all our people.

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for that. I have no doubt that the Chancellor will receive a great deal of advice and assistance in the weeks ahead. He will have listened carefully to my hon. Friend and I have no doubt that he will take it into account.

Q3. Mr. Luff: How will the Prime Minister fund his programme for young people when the money from the windfall tax dries up? All the experts agree that it will and that he will need extra money. [342]

The Prime Minister: I am delighted that the hon. Gentleman seems to understand, as his leader did not, that money is needed to tackle the problem. I agree wholeheartedly on that. The windfall levy is a one-off, but by getting young people off benefit and into work, we shall save money in the long term. Conservative Members shake their heads, but there is no doubt that there are young people in this country who are leaving school without any proper qualifications. If they do not get the right chances on skills and apprenticeships, they will never make anything of their lives.

During the election campaign, I met some third-generation families in which the father has not worked, the son has not worked and the grandson is not going to work either. Unless we try to give them some sort of chance to escape from that welfare dependency, we shall be in this difficulty for ever.

Lorna Fitzsimons: Will my right hon. Friend comment on the problems that our communities face not just from the causes of crime but from the underlying aggressive and loutish behaviour? What are the Government going to do about that?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right. That is one reason why the measures that we announced in the Queen's Speech tackle not merely juvenile offending and other criminal offences, but disruptive, noisy or anti-social neighbours. All hon. Members who have talked to their constituents will know of the misery caused by small groups of people who act in an anti-social way. This Government, at long last, is going to do something about it.

Q4. Mr. Curry: Do the Government intend to limit the amount of time that British fishermen can spend at sea to meet cuts in European quotas, as suggested by the Fisheries Minister? [343]

The Prime Minister: Against a background of negotiations that were not well handled by the previous Administration, we are trying to secure the best deal for our fishermen on quota hopping and on other issues so that we can put in place a long-term framework to guarantee their future and offer some stability.

Q5. Mr. Illsley: Is my right hon. Friend aware that an estimated 120 million anti-personnel land mines are

planted around the world? Every 20 minutes, those land mines kill or maim someone, often harming young, innocent children. When does my right hon. Friend expect to fulfil Labour's commitment to ban those evil weapons for good? [344]

The Prime Minister: I can tell my hon. Friend that the Government will announce later today that we will ban the import, export, transfer and manufacture of anti-personnel mines. We shall also phase out the United Kingdom stocks of anti-personnel land mines and ban the trade through the United Kingdom of all such land mines. They have caused enormous carnage, often to wholly innocent civilians, including children. The sooner that Britain gives a lead in this the better. It is the right and civilised thing to do.

Mr. Robert Jackson: Will the Prime Minister undertake a review of the somewhat curious arrangements for science policy that he has inherited?

Hon. Members: Reading.

Madam Speaker: Order.

Mr. Jackson: Will the right hon. Gentleman consider two points in particular: first, whether it is right to have the Government's chief scientific adviser located, not in the centre of government, but in one of the Departments that he is responsible for supervising, and secondly, whether it is sensible to have two separate Ministers responsible for research councils and for universities when research council funding is integral to the funding of universities?

The Prime Minister: First, I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question and for giving me notice of it. I pay tribute to his work in education and science when he was a Minister in the previous Administration. The review that is being conducted by the Minister of State, Department of Trade and Industry, my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds, West (Mr. Battle), will examine both the points that he raised. I give no undertakings at all as to the outcome of that review, but it will certainly examine those issues.

Q6. Mr. Winnick: So far as Northern Ireland is concerned, will my right hon. Friend confirm that the framework document remains on the table as that will provide a fair settlement for both communities in Northern Ireland, as well as for cross-border bodies? Does he agree that there is a particular responsibility on the part of the IRA to end its murderous terrorist campaign which has caused only pain, suffering and numerous deaths in the past 25 years? Is it not obvious that no amount of terrorist activity will in any way change the position in Northern Ireland? [345]

The Prime Minister: I very much agree with my hon. Friend about the activities of the IRA. Of course, all the documents that were negotiated by the previous Government remain on the table. As my hon. Friend knows, my officials are talking to Sinn Féin, but I should make it clear that there is no question of Sinn Féin participating in any talks whatever unless there is a clear,

credible and unequivocal ceasefire. That should be demonstrated in word and deed. Sinn Féin and everybody else should be under no illusions whatever about that.

Mr. Trimble: I endorse what the Prime Minister has just said about the terms of entry into talks for Sinn Féin. I am sure that he will ensure that that will be borne home to Sinn Féin in any discussions with officials and that he will ensure that discussion does not move into negotiation as that would not be permissible. I am sure that the Prime Minister is bearing in mind the fact that an election is taking place in Northern Ireland today. In the light of that and in the light of the comments by the Irish Prime Minister and by the hon. Member for Foyle (Mr. Hume) that he has commended, that a vote for Sinn Féin is a vote for murder, does he think that it was wise for officials in the Home Office and the Northern Ireland Office to arrange for events to take place today that would only boost the standing of Sinn Féin?

The Prime Minister: If I understand rightly, the events to which the hon. Gentleman is referring involve the transfer of prisoners. I shall return to that in a moment. In respect of the talks with Sinn Féin, there is no question of their being about a negotiation of a ceasefire. They are to make clear the Government's terms and conditions for Sinn Féin's entry into any such talks. Secondly, in relation to the two prisoners who have been transferred, I have made inquiries and it is clear that the arrangements were put in train before the general election. It follows the transfer in the past year of nine prisoners who were convicted of terrorist offences. It should not be seen in any way as a signal to Sinn Féin.

Pensioner Poverty

Q7. Mr. Pickthall: To ask the Prime Minister what proposals he has to alleviate poverty among existing pensioners. [346]

The Prime Minister: We are doing everything that we possibly can to alleviate poverty among Britain's pensioners. Many hundreds of thousands—perhaps millions—of Britain's pensioners enjoy a good standard of living; there are many more who do not. That is one reason why we are looking urgently at the help that can be given to Britain's poorest pensioners, and, of course, it is one reason why we are committed to the cut in VAT on fuel.

Mr. Pickthall: Does my right hon. Friend agree that one of the reasons for pensioner poverty is the complexity and sometimes arbitrary nature of the income support cut-off points? Will he find time—unlike the previous Government, who refused—to look at the work done by Lancashire county council's welfare rights service, which has managed to find ingenious means of getting 15 per cent. more pensioners to claim income support—about 7,000 individuals, totalling about £4 million going into pensioners' pockets in Lancashire? Will he use his immense influence to ensure that the Government's programme for ending pensioner poverty begins with getting pensioners the rights and benefits to which they are entitled?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to congratulate the work of those who are bringing home to pensioners

the entitlements that they have. I should say two other things to my hon. Friend. The review of pensions that is being undertaken by the Department of Social Security will include how we help those pensioners in greatest poverty. In addition, I hope that he can say to his constituents, as I would say to the country, that previous Labour Governments have done well by Britain's pensioners—always—and we will do well by them again. *[Interruption.]* We have done very well, as indeed they know. Although, no doubt, there will be different ways of doing well for a different age, we shall continue to do our best by Britain's pensioners.

Engagements

Q8. Mr. Wallace: If, as the Prime Minister indicated some moments ago, a lifting of the beef export ban is not exactly imminent, is he able to indicate what kind of approximate time scale our beef producers might reasonably expect? In the meantime, what steps are his Government taking to restrict imports into the United Kingdom of beef products that do not meet the same very high standards required of our domestic producers? [347]

The Prime Minister: We obviously want to do everything that we possibly can to encourage and bring about the lifting of the beef ban. I say to the hon. Gentleman with the greatest respect that I do not think that plucking out arbitrary timetables has a very good history in the matter. We remember what happened before. *[Laughter.]* I am sorry to bring back bad memories. I believe that we can make progress and I am hopeful that progress is being made. The very fact that we have a Government who are arguing the case sensibly and constructively gives us a far better chance than we had under the previous Administration.

Q9. Mr. Gordon Prentice: Does my right hon. Friend appreciate the indignation and outrage felt among bus passengers in north-east Lancashire, who have been left high and dry by Stagecoach? Even as I speak, bus fares are going up, services are being cut, drivers are leaving in droves and the situation is in crisis. Is not such a situation, where private monopolies have driven out public interest, a shaming indictment of the previous Government's policies? [348]

The Prime Minister: In the interests of non-confrontational exchanges across the Floor, we will leave it to others to judge whether the situation is a shaming indictment. The one thing that is quite clear is that there are severe problems with the regulatory system at the moment. That is why my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister is, in addition to his rain-making duties, undertaking a review of bus regulation. We are well aware of the need to ensure, particularly for people in rural communities, that they get the bus services that they need.

Q10. Mr. Gray: Will the Prime Minister find time to visit employers in my constituency of North Wiltshire who tell me that they will lay off workers the morning after he brings in the minimum wage? Does he agree that the tragically high level of youth unemployment on the continent of Europe is not least because of the job-destroying minimum wage in Europe? [349]

The Prime Minister: I must say to the hon. Gentleman that the United States has a minimum wage and a lower

unemployment rate than we do. In contradistinction to the position here, that is now a matter for agreement between the republicans and democrats. It is a pity that we cannot obtain the same agreement about decency. Employers will be fully consulted about the level at which the minimum wage is set and how it is implemented. That is very important. I do not believe that the Conservative way of competing on the basis of low wages and low skills is the right future for Britain. We will compete in the future by investing in our people and by employers recognising that if they treat people fairly, they will get the best out of them. If that is one change that an incoming Labour Government can make, we will have done a service to the whole country.

Mrs. Fyfe: Has my right hon. Friend noticed that in this first session of Prime Minister's questions we have already got through more questions than we used to in two quarter-hour sessions? It has been a more civilised

and informative event than ever before and I look forward to more in the future. On the question of the national minimum wage, many of us take great pride in the fact that the Labour party has stuck to that policy through thick and thin and intends to implement it as early as possible.

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for those comments and I hope that people will understand that this is a better way to organise Prime Minister's questions. The Select Committee on Procedure that my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House is establishing will look at ways that it can be improved in the light of experience.

On the minimum wage, I do not wish to repeat what I said earlier, but some 800,000 people in this country are paid £2.50 an hour or less. There are reasons of efficiency for introducing some basic minimum threshold for pay, but there are also reasons of decency and fairness, and we shall do it.

Points of Order

3.31 pm

Mr. Peter Brooke (Cities of London and Westminster): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. *[Interruption.]*

Madam Speaker: Will hon. Members please leave quickly and quietly? We have business to do.

Mr. Brooke: Have you had any requests for a statement on the saving of Bart's—if it is true, I welcome it—which has so far emerged in briefings to Back Benchers, among whom, I cheerfully remark, the local Member of Parliament has not been included? That seems as unsatisfactory a method of instructing Parliament on the issue as the original written answer about the closure. Until we have the opportunity to cross-examine Ministers, we cannot break out the champagne.

Madam Speaker: I am not aware of any statement or comment on the issue that the right hon. Gentleman mentioned. His point of order gives me an opportunity, for which I am grateful, early in the life of the Government to remind those on the Treasury Bench that any statement on a change of policy should be made first to the House, not outside and not to Back Benchers. The House needs to know first of any change of policy and I hope that those on the Treasury Bench take my words to heart and inform any Ministers concerned.

Mr. Michael Connarty (Falkirk, East): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. In the interests of advancing the Chamber into the civilised world, may I suggest that you think seriously about changing the rules so that hon. Members can read questions if they wish? When hon. Members were asked to speak without reading pieces of paper, it may have been a way to demonstrate their public school upbringing, but they now have the ability to read and should be allowed to read questions without being barracked by other hon. Members in the Chamber.

Madam Speaker: That is not a point of order for me. If the hon. Gentleman wishes our procedures to be changed, the Select Committee on Procedure will soon be established and he can refer the matter to it.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. Are you aware that at 8 o'clock this morning Liberal Democrat Members attempted to put in more prayer cards than there were hon. Members from that party present? I am sure that you will wish to deprecate that. Will you make it clear to Liberal Democrats, and to any other hon. Members in the Chamber who do not know, that prayer cards can be put in only by the hon. Member involved and not by anyone else?

Madam Speaker: The right hon. Gentleman is right to remind the House, especially new Members, that prayer cards can be put in only by the Member concerned. Members must be present in person to do so. I certainly deprecate the use of other Members to put prayer cards in place.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Speaker: Just a minute. I have more points of order here.

Mr. John Greenway (Ryedale): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. A moment ago, you made a welcome statement about the rights of Back Benchers and the need for policy announcements to be made in the House. May I ask you to go further? Yesterday, an important announcement about policy change in relation to the Bank of England and the City of London was made, but no briefing papers about the statement were available in the Vote Office. Should not that be put right?

Madam Speaker: Briefing papers and documentation in the Vote Office have always been a question for the Minister concerned, not for the Speaker. I am concerned to ensure that when statements are made, they are made in the House, and not outside—but, as I said, documentation is the responsibility of the Minister concerned.

Mr. Alan Clark (Kensington and Chelsea): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. Two minutes ago you will have heard the hon. Member for Falkirk, East (Mr. Connarty) make a derogatory remark about people with a public school education. Do you not agree that it is a usual courtesy of the House to give notice of such remarks? The hon. Gentleman might have advised the Prime Minister before he made that point.

Madam Speaker: The hon. Member for Falkirk, East (Mr. Connarty) would have had writer's cramp this morning if he had tried to write to all hon. Members with a public school education, so we need not worry about that question.

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. Before I came into the Chamber for the debate, or rather, for Question Time, ready for the debate on the referendums, I asked the Vote Office for the papers from the Government about what would actually be set up by the referendums—that is, the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly. I was told that there was none. Was that an oversight by the Vote Office, or have the Government really not given us any information about what we are to discuss in relation to the referendums?

Madam Speaker: All that we have to deal with today is the usual question of the Bill before us. No doubt the hon. Gentleman has had it for some time, has thoroughly digested it and is ready to speak on it when I call him.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Speaker: Just a moment. This is getting to be like a jack-in-the-box, with everyone bobbing up and down. Who is next?

Mr. Michael Fallon (Sevenoaks): Further to that point of order, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: Order. We do not take further points of order. I have dealt with that matter, and we shall now deal with the Bill. There are no further points of order once the Speaker has responded.

Orders of the Day

Referendums (Scotland and Wales) Bill

Order for Second Reading read.

Madam Speaker: I have selected the amendment standing in the name of the Leader of the Opposition.

3.36 pm

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr. Donald Dewar): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

For the convenience of the House, I should make it clear that although I shall try to deal with the Bill as a whole in explanatory terms, I shall of course lay particular emphasis on the Scottish aspects. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales will deal with the debate tomorrow, and he, perhaps, will be able to fill in more completely than I shall have time to do, the arguments concerning the Principality.

The measure is a deceptively simple one.

Mr. Robert MacLennan (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. It was a little difficult to hear you as Members were leaving the Chamber, but did I understand you to say that you had selected the amendment in the name of the Leader of the Opposition? If so, did you consider the possibility of calling the amendment in the name of my right hon. and hon. Friends, or that tabled by other parties that are represented in Scotland—

Mr. Richard Livsey (Brecon and Radnorshire): And in Wales.

Mr. MacLennan:—and Wales—bearing in mind the fact that the official Opposition have no direct representation in Scotland?

Mr. Livsey: Or in Wales.

Mr. MacLennan: This is an unusual situation, but unusual situations merit unusual responses by the House.

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (North Essex): Further to that point of order, Madam Speaker. Do you agree that the Bill is not a "Scotland" Bill but a United Kingdom measure, so the United Kingdom Parliament should decide on it?

Mr. Oliver Heald (North-East Hertfordshire): Further to that point of order, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: No, no. We cannot go on with points of order. I can deal perfectly well with the point. Many Members wish to speak in the debate, and I want to call them, so let me answer the original point of order.

Yes, of course, I looked seriously at the reasoned amendments on the Order Paper. I consulted for a long time this morning and gave the matter a great deal of thought, and I came to the conclusion that I have announced to the House. I want the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Mr. MacLennan) and the rest of the House to understand that I took a great

deal of time and trouble to consider those reasoned amendments, to take advice and to listen to it. But of course, finally, I have to make the decision, and I am sure that the hon. Gentleman understands that.

Mrs. Margaret Ewing (Moray): Further to that point of order, Madam Speaker. Will the ruling that you have just made be a precedent for future debates on Scottish and Welsh measures?

Madam Speaker: The hon. Lady is asking a hypothetical question. I deal only with matters of the moment, and I will deal with that issue when I need to.

Mr. Dewar: This is an important Bill. On the face of it, it is neither long nor complex, but it is a first and decisive step towards delivering a Parliament for the people of Scotland. Therefore, it is a measure of great importance. That is marked by the fact that it is the first Bill to be given a Second Reading by the new Government.

The Bill will pave the way for that Parliament, and its passage is an essential preparation for it. The whole constitutional package that is to be presented to the House is important. Few of us would dispute that there is widespread cynicism about the political processes and, arguably, democracy itself is in some disrepute. Most Members of Parliament—however much we might disagree about the solution—would accept that this is a very real problem. It is this problem that we are, in part, trying to address with our constitutional measures.

What we are looking for is openness and accessibility in government, as well as modern, democratic and responsive government. The Parliament that we envisage in Scotland—working within the framework of the United Kingdom and strengthened by that—will put under democratic control the substantial and extensive powers at present exercised by the Secretary of State for Scotland. We want to make those accessible and more immediately responsive to the public will in Scotland.

Mr. Michael Fallon (Sevenoaks): The Secretary of State has referred to making government more open and accessible and to the "whole constitutional package". Would not it have been better to have held the Bill back until we could see the detail of the Government's constitutional proposals?

Hon. Members: No.

Mr. Dewar: I am getting some advice from my Back-Bench colleagues, which I gladly accept.

The hon. Member for Sevenoaks (Mr. Fallon) will not be surprised to hear that that is not my opinion. The Bill will allow a test of public opinion and is a matter of establishing consent. It is not a Second Reading *apêtitif* for devolution in Scotland or Wales. There is, I would argue, a strong case for having a test of public opinion, but whether we should or should not is the question before us. If the Bill reaches the statute book and we move to the referendum, there will be a White Paper that will clearly set out the scheme and which will inform the public of the details—although I have to say that, in Scotland, Wales and other parts of the country, these issues are well understood. In any event, the White Paper

will set out the scheme in some detail, and it is on that basis that the arguments will rage. It may be that I shall come across the hon. Member for Sevenoaks in my travels, which will be a pleasure. It is then that the arguments on devolution itself will take place.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): When will the people of England be consulted on what they think about all this?

Mr. Dewar: That is a rather brave point, but I have to accept that the right hon. Gentleman is sometimes brave to the point of perversity. He is brave in making that point, given the recent election results in this country. In any event, there is a clear precedent from 1979. This is a mechanism for testing opinion, which deals with the challenge repeatedly made by the Conservative party in Scotland and in other parts of the country—that there is no consent in Scotland. I shall return to that matter in a moment.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr. Dewar: I will not give way, as I have a lot of substantive points to make.

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): Will the Secretary of State give way on that point?

Mr. Dewar: If the hon. Gentleman will allow me, I have a substantial case to make and I feel that if I give way over-indulgently—even to such an attractive option as a question from the hon. Gentleman—we might never make progress at all.

I hope that the House will forgive me for making one personal point. In campaigning on devolution, I am one of those who can look back over many years—indeed, back to the 1950s. I was campaigning then, I have been campaigning ever since and I remain committed to that cause.

When I came back to the House in 1978, after a sad misunderstanding with the electorate that kept me out for eight years, I found John Smith, one of my foundation friends, bearing the weight of the battle. As I look around me, it is odd to see that some things have not changed—my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell), for example, is still with characteristic persistence holding to his lonely course. Indeed, I suspect that there are some things that will never change.

I remember those days between 1976 and 1978 and the remarkable achievement of John and his colleagues in getting the Bill on to the statute book at a time when the Government were failing and there were enormous and complex political problems. Perhaps because of John Smith and because of the special nature of that argument, the term “unfinished business” has a special meaning and significance in Scottish politics.

As we start on what I hope will be the final stage of this great saga, I am very much aware of my responsibilities, of the work and the challenges that lie ahead and also of the optimism and expectation that certainly rest in Scotland and, I believe, in Wales, on the passage and progress of this legislation. There is a genuine mood for change and I hope that the House will be prepared to rise to it.

Mr. Michael Ancram (Devizes): The Secretary of State referred to the work done by the late John Smith.

Will he recall and confirm that when that measure was taken through the House, the Bill was first and the referendum second? Is not that a precedent that he should follow now?

Mr. Dewar: I know that this is often said to postpone, but I shall be dealing with the order of events in a few minutes. If the right hon. Gentleman waits, he will receive an explanation that has some relevance to his experience and that, I hope, will appeal to him.

It is a mark of the changed times and of this Government's determination that I expect that we shall be able to publish the White Paper within a total time scale of around three months. I remember that the comparable time in the 1970s was almost three years. That difference reflects the changes in the opinions in my party—it certainly reflects changes in the popular mood in Scotland and in Wales and, I think, in the country as a whole, which I welcome.

As one sometimes loses the neatness of the scheme when one takes up interventions, let me remind the House of the order of events as we intend them. We start today with the Second Reading of the Referendums (Scotland and Wales) Bill. The remaining stages will take place the week after the Whit recess. As those who have read the Bill will realise, there is provision for secondary legislation, and the necessary orders will be published in draft in the same week as the remaining stages are taken.

As I explained, the White Paper will be ready well ahead of the referendum—before the House rises—allowing for a full statement in the House and discussion at that stage. The referendum will come in the autumn—certainly, before the major party conferences. The substantive legislation—that will be when we lock horns on the merits of the devolution package itself—will come before the end of the year. If that legislation has a successful passage, elections to the new Parliament will be held as soon as is practical after Royal Assent. We could have a Parliament in place in Scotland and Wales to welcome the new millennium, and that will be extremely popular and right.

I say unashamedly that this is a massive undertaking—moving from the aspirations of opposition to a defined scheme that is workable and efficient and is accepted and endorsed by Parliament and the people. I believe that we can hold to the timetable that I have outlined.

Mr. William Cash (Stone): May I put the United Kingdom question to the right hon. Gentleman? On the dismembering of the United Kingdom under the projected proposals in the Bill, does he agree that it is essential that the people of the United Kingdom, including Northern Ireland, should have the right to give their verdict on the questions posed in the Bill?

Mr. Dewar: I doubt whether the hon. Gentleman's constituents would thank him for landing them with that responsibility.

Mr. Cash: Oh, yes they would.

Mr. Dewar: I wonder; but I will not get into an “Oh, yes they would”, “Oh, no they wouldn't” exchange with the hon. Gentleman, because if there is one thing about

[Mr. Dewar]

him that I admire, it is his staying power, and he might well best me in such a debate. I shall therefore return to the logic of the argument.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr. Dewar: I shall take one more intervention, and then move on for a considerable period.

Mr. Ian Bruce: I think that the right hon. Gentleman is misinterpreting my reason for intervening. I take a great deal of interest in Welsh and Scottish affairs, and was born in Wales, as he will know. My difficulty, as I represent an English constituency, is in knowing whether I should support the Bill—which I might well do, because it provides for a test of opinion in Scotland—without knowing, as I cannot until he issues the papers, what powers the Scottish Parliament is to have and whether it will affect my English constituents, who will have to pay for it.

Mr. Dewar: The hon. Gentleman belittles himself. I admire modesty, but on this occasion I detect a touch of false modesty. If he is saying that he does not understand the outline of the scheme and is unable to reach his own conclusion, that tells us something about his powers of decision rather than about the difficulties experienced by most people.

Mr. Elfyn Llwyd (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy) *rose*—

Mr. Dewar: I shall take one more intervention, as it comes from the Welsh nationalists.

Mr. Llwyd: I thank the Secretary of State. In an effort to be constructive, I want to mention one thing: he said earlier that the White Paper would be produced within three months, before we broke up for the summer. May I impress upon him the need for the White Paper to be available to the House before we break up for the summer, so that the matter can be fully debated by the Welsh Grand Committee—and no doubt the Scottish Grand Committee—as well as the whole House?

Mr. Dewar: It is certainly my intention that both the Welsh and the Scottish White Papers should be available before the House rises. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales would be glad to have a word with the hon. Gentleman about that. There is nothing between us on that matter, at least, regardless of what may transpire in the future.

Mr. Richard Shepherd (Aldridge-Brownhills) *rose*—

Mr. Dewar: I am very sorry, but I shall get into trouble with the House if I take endless interventions. I might refer later to a group in which the hon. Gentleman is involved.

Mr. Shepherd *rose*—

Mr. Dewar: I cannot resist the hon. Gentleman: he is beguiling.

Mr. Shepherd: I bless the right hon. Gentleman. I merely wanted clarification that the subsequent stages of the Bill, as a major constitutional measure, will be taken on the Floor of the House.

Mr. Dewar: That will certainly be the case. I have repeatedly made it clear that I am not an enemy of proper

scrutiny and discussion, and I hope that the hon. Gentleman, whom I have known for a long time, will accept that. We shall see how we progress, but I certainly hope that we shall have a proper look at all the arguments in some detail.

I have made the point, and I spell it out again, that the Second Reading is on the Bill, not on devolution as such. The Bill makes no judgment on the issues and arguments surrounding devolution, but allows the final decision about endorsement to lie with the people.

I remind the House that referendums are not unprecedented: we had them in 1975 and 1979, on matters of fundamental constitutional change in both cases. We believe that there is a case, on such occasions and issues, for an inclusive process, gathering support across party political boundaries. What we seek—whether we get it is a matter for the people—is a broadly based consensus for change.

I want to deal briefly with the simple and basic question: why a referendum? I have already hinted at the answer that I shall give. Throughout the past year or two, we have consistently been challenged on the wisdom of introducing a Bill, on the basis that there was no consent for it.

The argument, which I understand, is that people vote at general elections for many reasons. It has often been put to me that the nice man who lives down on the corner may have voted Liberal Democrat for many reasons. Was it because he specifically endorsed proportional representation; because he wanted an enormously forward position on Europe; because he was an enthusiast for Scottish devolution; or, for example, because he simply could not stand the Tories, and the Liberal Democrats were an easy way of getting out of that dilemma? Many of my Tory friends, and I am not one to dispute it with them, found the last explanation the most plausible.

In those circumstances, I have a scintilla of sympathy with the argument that consent is open to challenge. Rather honourably, we decided to face up to that challenge—not shrug it off—and put it to the test in a referendum. That is what we are inviting the House to authorise. I shall come to pre-referendum and post-referendum tests later, but the House should have some sympathy with the general argument.

Mr. Bernard Jenkin: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Dewar: I let the hon. Gentleman in on Friday. I do not want to make a habit of doing it every time that I speak, because I fear that if I am generous now, he will take it as a precedent. I should be obliged if he waited.

There is advantage in popular consent. In our unwritten constitution, popular consent gives a certain legitimacy. In a sense, it is the way to build the devolution scheme into the system and to give it roots. That, for me, is attractive. It also gives the Opposition, and those who dissent from my point of view, the opportunity to defeat it and, in effect, to kill it. That seems right. If we get the

right result, we have moral authority to speed the passage of devolution. That is again a matter for the people and we shall have to see what the results ultimately bring.

Mr. Jenkin *rose*—

Mr. Andrew Rowe (Faversham and Mid-Kent) *rose*—

Mr. Dewar: I give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Jenkin: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his courtesy. May I suggest that he should take the advice of the right hon. Member for Hamilton, South (Mr. Robertson) about why there is to be a referendum before a Bill on Scottish devolution is put before the House? It has nothing to do with the airy-fairy arguments that the right hon. Gentleman advances; it has to do with the fact that the opposition to the principle of devolution was so effectively conducted by Michael Forsyth, the former Member for Stirling. Seeking powers to raise an extra tax in Scotland became such an embarrassment to the Labour party that the Prime Minister imposed the referendum policy on the Scottish Labour party.

Mr. Dewar: We all make mistakes. I thought that I was letting in the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid-Kent (Mr. Rowe), who is sitting beside the hon. Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin). That was unfortunate. I appreciate that the hon. Gentleman was trying to whitewash his part as a very minor sprocket in the departing Scottish Office team. I assure him that I very often take the advice of my right hon. Friend the Member for Hamilton, South (Mr. Robertson), and hope to do so many times in future.

Mr. Alex Salmond (Banff and Buchan) *rose*—

Mr. Dewar: I must make some progress. I should like to deal with some of the amendments. I have listened with interest to what has been said by Opposition Members.

The hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Mr. MacLennan) is a very old friend. I was a little surprised that he was anxious for us to give the light of day to the Liberal Democrat amendment. I should have thought that it was more a case of private grief breaking into public view, although I might be prejudiced. The Liberal Democrats' reasoned amendment is interesting because it welcomes

"appropriate referendum proposals for Wales,"

but mysteriously discovers that a referendum in Scotland is unnecessary. It seems that the Liberal Democrats have managed to square a circle, on which I congratulate them. It is a curiosity, a collector's piece. In any event, it will not be debated now.

Mr. MacLennan: The right hon. Gentleman must be aware that there is less certainty about the outcome of a referendum in Wales than of one in Scotland, even on the most optimistic assumptions that the Government no doubt make. In this disunited kingdom, it is reasonable to have arguments to address both cases separately.

Mr. Dewar: It is not satisfactory to hold elections only when one thinks that one might lose them. It is an interesting democratic principle. It has some appeal.

It may be irrelevant to the debate, but I have dreamt about a re-run of the 1997 general election for the past three nights. I found it very refreshing.

Mr. Edward Garnier (Harborough): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Dewar: I am sorry, but I must make some progress. I look to the Chair for protection.

The Tory amendment deals specifically with the question of the pre-legislative referendum, and I understand that. I have explained that we see the purpose of the referendum to establish consent in principle and to move on to the next stage, we hope with renewed impetus and some authority. The Tory party has concentrated on that issue. In a sense, it is an interesting matter of constitutional practice whether the engine pushes or pulls the train. One could hold many learned colloquies on that point, and I have no doubt about the mental ingenuity of the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard).

I stress again that the aim is to establish consent before plunging the Government machine, the civil service, the House of Commons and the House of Lords into the complexities of this journey. Parliament still has a job to do against the background of the advice offered by the people in the referendum if the scheme goes ahead. It clears the way and allows Parliament to do its job of scrutiny knowing the true basis of the support. I hope that that support will go beyond narrow party boundaries. I feel strongly that constitutional change is not the partisan property of any single party. As I tried to explain, rather unsuccessfully, to the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague), events in Scotland are reinforcing that message. A vote with a clear-cut decision in the referendum will provide stability and a background against which Parliament can do its job.

Mr. Garnier *rose*—

Mr. Dewar: It is not without precedent. I make the point to the right hon. Member for Devizes (Mr. Ancram)—

Mr. Garnier *rose*—

Madam Speaker: Order. The hon. and learned Member for Harborough (Mr. Garnier) should not keep trying to intervene when the Secretary of State has made it clear that he is unlikely to give way.

Hon. Members: He is a new boy.

Mr. Dewar: I am not sure that he is. He looks horribly familiar to me.

Mr. Garnier: I am grateful to you, Madam Speaker, and to the Secretary of State for allowing me to participate. As the right hon. Gentleman is so keen on the public consent aspect of the referendum—I do not argue with the need for that—will he address the House on

[Mr. Garnier]

clauses 1(3) and 2(3), which will allow Greeks, Finns, French, Danes and other European Union residents of Scotland to vote in the referendum?

Mrs. Ewing: Why not?

Mr. Garnier: Why not, possibly, but it will not allow my constituents who are members of the EU and United Kingdom residents to vote in that important referendum.

Mr. Dewar: I shall come to that in a moment, but I want to draw the hon. and learned Gentleman's attention to the concept of residency, which has some relevance in the matter.

The pre-legislation referendum is not without precedent. The right hon. Member for Devizes will remember the Northern Ireland framework document, which is a recent example. There was the triple-lock mechanism under which there was to be political discussion and, it was hoped, broad agreement. That was to be followed by a referendum and then by legislation. I do not want to dwell on that, but it is an example and there are circumstances in which that has occurred.

Let me put it this way. The rule appears to be that when it suits, not perhaps even the Government but a wider part of the House, a pre-legislation referendum is not so unacceptable, unthinkable and offensive. I should have thought that the argument about consent that has been raging would echo around, if not the constituency of Devizes, at least the ancestral acres of the right hon. Member for Devizes, so that he would be aware of the need to settle the issue of consent. I shall leave it for the right hon. Gentleman to think about. No doubt we can debate it again on another occasion.

Mr. Ancram: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Dewar: If the right hon. Gentleman does not mind, I shall not give way, because I am conscious of the abuse of the House.

There is nothing surprising in the Tory amendment. What is surprising is what is not in it. I understood from the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks that an issue on which the Conservatives were particularly het up, to use a Scottish colloquialism, was the need for thresholds, and that does not appear in the amendment. The right hon. Gentleman said that there was

"a powerful case for a threshold".

There was then perhaps a touch of the faint heart or a wish to distance himself, because he went on merely to say that the Opposition would table

"a number of amendments to the Bill, and some will deal with the question of possible thresholds."—[*Official Report*, 16 May 1997, Vol. 294, c. 286, 291.]

It may be—I understand this—that he did not want to be too closely associated with the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood), who had started that particular hare running. Perhaps he was thinking about the dangers of guilt by association.

In any event, I understand that there is considerable interest among Conservative Members in thresholds. The right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks might be even

more worried if he reads the second Conservative reasoned amendment. It comes from what the Leader of the Opposition once slightly unhappily called the bastard tendency, which takes the view that there should be a fancy franchise and artificial obstacles in the way of the democratic process. That view was rather strongly endorsed by the right hon. Member for Devizes when he replied to the constitutional debate last Friday.

I do not know whether the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe intends to say a word or two about the other Conservative amendment. I presume that, if amendments are to be tabled in about a week, he has a clear mind on what they are likely to contain. It would be extremely helpful for the House if it had some sight of the amendments on thresholds with which we are to be presented so that we can, with fair and equitable minds, assess them. I hope that the right hon. and learned Gentleman will not think it amiss if I tell him that I have a prejudice against such amendments and that I take the view that a test of public opinion is conducted on the basis of simple majority in this country. If he or his party tried to revisit the 40 per cent. rule, it would be seen in the most basic terms, certainly in Scotland and Wales, as something akin to ballot rigging, and would be treated with contempt.

At a time when the Scottish Conservative party is clearly considering a shift in position or at least a move towards individual conscience rather than a collective view on devolution, it would be unfortunate if there were shabby manoeuvring or what would clearly be seen as such in order to fix the result. If that is in contemplation, it is important that the Opposition reveal their hand in good time. I do not advise the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe to go down that road, or to travel north with that glad news. He might find himself as unpopular there as he has been in certain other quarters rather spectacularly in recent days.

In fairness, I shall not say more about that, but if the right hon. and learned Gentleman would like to look at the views that have been expressed by a range of office bearers in the Scottish Conservative party and by a majority of party chairmen who could be contacted by the newspapers, he will see—I put it modestly—that there is a wish to rethink and certainly to be seen to play fair in the Scottish Conservative party on this issue. I greatly welcome that. The perhaps spiteful side of Westminster politics should not get in the way of that process. That would be bad for democracy, bad, funnily enough, for the Conservative party—although that is not my first priority—and bad for the process of constitutional reform. I hope that the right hon. and learned Gentleman will take that on board.

Mr. Andrew Rowe: If in the referendum the Scottish people vote yes to the first question and no to the second, will the Government have any objection to my constituents in Kent refusing to contribute to the costs of the Scottish Parliament? They will have no opportunity to vote on its creation and no representation within it. I thought that taxation without representation was something of which we did not approve.

Mr. Dewar: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, but I did not know that his constituents intended or expected to pay for the Scottish Parliament. However, if he intends to make that offer, I shall certainly be prepared to have a

look at it. Indeed, it might make for some unexpected good will between us. He should perhaps take that suggestion back and have a look at his generosity.

Mr. William Hague (Richmond, Yorks): In the light of his answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid-Kent (Mr. Rowe), will the right hon. Gentleman make the position clear? Is the implication of his answer that the costs of the Scottish Parliament and proposed Welsh Assembly are to be met out of the Scottish and Welsh blocks and, therefore, out of the budget for public services in Scotland and Wales?

Mr. Dewar: I have a special passage on that in my speech, which I know the right hon. Gentleman will no doubt be looking forward to if he stays the course. He might reason with his hon. Friends to let me make some progress and then that passage will come all the quicker.

It is clear from the outset that what we are looking for is to settle the question of consent for the specific scheme. The scheme has been set out in the White Paper and it can be judged and endorsed if it is thought right by the people. It follows from that, and it is an important point that I know is dear to the heart of the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Mr. Salmond) and some others, that we are not running an opinion poll or what is sometimes rather vulgarly called a beauty contest. We are looking for a particular endorsement of a practical scheme. It is not a matter of running the gamut of every possibility and then considering what to do at the end of the process.

I have a clear view on the matter. I have watched the debate rage for close on 20 years. We have made surprisingly little progress in practical terms, and I want to see practical progress. It is because I want to see such progress that I want to concentrate upon that aim and that objective. That leads me to the conclusion that we should be concentrating on the scheme that is on the stocks and which is on offer. If we get the endorsement of that scheme specifically, we should be in the House pressing ahead from that.

Mr. Salmond *rose—*

Mr. Dewar: I shall let the hon. Gentleman intervene in a moment, but I have one other related point to make.

Even though the hon. Gentleman and I may have differences of interpretation, I hope that he will accept that I should be the last to challenge the sovereignty of the people or to deny them the right to opt for any solution to the constitutional question which they wished. For example, if they want to go for independence, I see no reason why they should not do so. In fact, if they want to, they should. I should be the first to accept that.

It is on that basis that I had no difficulty—perhaps this is a Scottish point—in signing the Claim of Right, but that does not imply that the people had to exercise their right by travelling on one particular road. That does not imply that if they failed to pick the road with the exit sign from the United Kingdom, they were betraying their trust. That is not my view. I believe that people have a right to choice, but that they have the right to every choice. I believe that the choice that they have made is the choice that we have put before them—there is evidence to support that claim. I hope that the referendum will settle that point.

I accept that if the nationalists want to progress their cause—I do not expect them to pack their bags and go home—their route to putting independence back on the agenda is to carry the people with them. With six seats and a long record of failure in that respect, however, they have much to do and a long way to come.

Mr. Salmond: There is nothing between the right hon. Gentleman and myself about the matter of choice. I fully accept that argument. If the scheme is on the stocks, as the right hon. Gentleman put it, we can look for an early publication of the White Paper. If he is arguing that the general election did not decide the constitutional question, why will he not offer the choice between the well-supported constitutional options of independence, devolution and the status quo? Does he recall on 23 April 1992 telling *The Scotsman* that the case for a multi-option referendum should be shouted from the rooftops? Why was it to be shouted from the rooftops in 1992, but not to be countenanced in 1997?

Mr. Dewar: I am always slightly depressed when people have good cuttings files. If the hon. Gentleman would like to look back at the context in which I made that remark in 1992, he will appreciate that it was after an overwhelming vote for change in Scotland and the refusal of the then Government to take any action of any type. It was in that specific context that that campaign was launched. We are now in government with a policy that was contained in our manifesto. We are honestly going to put it to the people. If we are wrong and they reject it, that is their option. I am not going to be distracted, however, or put off from making progress as I think right on this occasion.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire) *rose—*

Mr. Dewar: I am sorry, but I shall not give way. I have been speaking for more than half an hour, and in fairness to the House, I must get on.

I should like to consider briefly the contents of the Bill. This is the first time that I have done so and I find it a slightly daunting prospect when a speech becomes a list. It is important, however, that there is clarity. Put briefly, clause 1 authorises the holding of a referendum in Scotland and it explains that the date of it will appear in secondary legislation. The clause also defines the questions, sets the franchise, which will be based on the local government elections, provides for the appointment of a chief counting officer for Scotland and counting officers for each local authority area, and sets out their primary duties.

The House will appreciate—and this is an important point—that great care has been taken in framing the propositions. We took advice from people learned in electoral practices. We have tried hard to go for clarity and, above all, fairness. I genuinely believe that we have been scrupulous in trying to avoid any leading questions, and I hope that there is universal agreement that that has been fairly achieved.

Mr. David Heathcoat-Amory (Wells): In this part of the Bill, the House is being asked to give away its tax-varying powers in a referendum question. Taxation goes to the heart of the House's powers, so, at the very least, does the right hon. Gentleman agree that we must

[Mr. David Heathcoat-Amory]

be given practical answers as to whether it is feasible, in a single United Kingdom administrative and fiscal region, to have different tax rates applying to the earnings or investment income of different citizens, according to whether they work or live in various parts of the United Kingdom? Will he undertake to give the House full proposals and details before we agree to handing over those powers by way of a referendum?

Mr. Dewar: The subject will of course be dealt with in the White Paper. I am a little puzzled, because I do not know anything about the right hon. Gentleman's personal circumstances, but I would lay a small bet that he and I pay different rates of tax from those of most of my constituents. Of course we have variations in the sense that we have local tax, national tax, indirect taxes and direct taxes. We have a whole portfolio, a portmanteau, a travelling pantechnicon of taxes under all Governments and I do not accept the impossibility argument to which he refers, but it is an important issue and we shall return to it.

As I say, we have tried to be scrupulous about avoiding leading questions. We are anxious that no one should misunderstand what they are being asked to decide on and that there should be a minimum of spoilt papers. We shall use two ballot papers in Scotland because of the two questions. That is obviously to allow a free vote on each issue and to aid the counting process. I believe that it can be done with great fairness and great clarity, and that is our intention. The detail will be in the White Paper. We shall obviously, as I have stressed time and again, come to it in good time, and well ahead of the referendum.

Sir Patrick Cormack: If the right hon. Gentleman believes that the new Scottish Parliament is not going to be a danger to the continuance of the United Kingdom, and I believe that he is sincere in that, why cannot we have a third question in the referendum, inviting people to proclaim their belief in the United Kingdom?

Mr. Dewar: Because that would imply that those who are going to vote yes in the referendum are the enemies of the United Kingdom. As the hon. Gentleman has conceded, he assumes that I am genuine in my view, and my view is that we shall strengthen the United Kingdom by bringing in a more democratic and responsive form of government. It is obviously impossible to present me with a referendum in which I have alternatives but in which I might want to vote yes both times. I am sure that, if he thinks about it, he will understand that point.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr. Dewar: I shall not take further interventions. I am sorry, but I have outstayed my welcome.

I understand that there are doubts about the second question. My friends in the Liberal Democrat party and on the Liberal Democrat Benches feel those doubts particularly strongly, but in my view, the whole question of revenue raising is a discipline and a responsibility, and the right to vary tax is an important part of the scheme. Opponents will view it as an opportunity, of course. The tartan tax—the playing to the pocket—will no doubt be a prominent feature of the campaign, as it was in the

campaign in the run-up to the election. I might be wrong, but I believe that it will be as unsuccessful as it was in the run-up to the election. However, whether it is an opportunity for my opponents or not, we came to the view that it was right that the people should be allowed to decide in Scotland, and we went for the second question.

I think that we shall win that because it will be very difficult for even someone with the ingenuity of the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe somehow to persuade Scots that although there are many tiers of government with varying revenue and taxation powers, it is a unique impossibility, an abomination and a danger when similar powers are given to Scots sitting as a body, elected and responsible for wide-ranging legislative powers. That is in effect asking the Scots to give a resounding vote of no confidence to their own probity and responsibility and their ability to conduct business. I do not believe that we shall have that.

As the House, or those who have followed the argument, may remember, the poll in *The Scotsman* in January this year suggested that there was very substantial approval—59 per cent., in fact—for those powers. That may not be an accurate reflection, or it may change, but it is honourable and right to find out in the only way that matters and is clear. That is what we shall do.

The local authority franchise has been picked because it is the one that is available and which most nearly accords with the residency test, which we believe is the proper way to decide someone's eligibility to vote. It has some odd consequences, some of which I welcome. For example, it ensures that peers in Scotland will be able to vote. Rather to my surprise, perhaps because Scotland is a sort of second home for that group, there are only 123 of them, I am told, but still, let us value those 123 votes. They may be glad to know that it will not be possible to identify them and discover exactly how they voted in the referendum.

Some European nationals will also be included, a matter that has been raised. That is defensible on the simple ground that they are European nationals who have established the right of residence in Scotland. It will also have the effect—

Mr. Dafydd Wigley (Caernarfon): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Dewar: No, I am sorry. We can come back to this matter on many other occasions.

Picking the local authority franchise also has the effect of excluding overseas voters. If we had gone for the parliamentary franchise, which is marginally smaller, we would have had to include overseas voters, which would have meant that the fine old peppery gentleman who has spent 17 years in Kuala Lumpur but who takes a great interest in what is happening in the old country would have had a vote. [Interruption.] I am not aware of his domicile.

Mr. Wigley: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Dewar: No.

Madam Speaker: Order. The Secretary of State has made it clear to me and to the hon. Gentleman that he is not giving way at the moment. This is an important matter that we need to know about.

Mr. Dewar: I apologise to the hon. Gentleman. I said that I would not take any more interventions, but I am

happy to speak to the hon. Gentleman personally afterwards, to try to deal with whatever is troubling him at this stage.

The chief counting officer will be for the whole of Scotland and there will of course be one officer for each local government area. That is the precedent of 1979. The result that matters is the national result, but the local government results—area by area—will also be available. The final aggregate will tell the story that matters. The Bill is the way to ensure that that happens.

As an addendum, I hope—I cannot be definitive about this—that, unlike 1979, we shall have the final result on the night, rather than having to wait until the next day. That is certainly my intention if it is at all practicably possible. I just wanted to record that.

Mr. Wigley rose—

Mr. Dewar: I am very sorry, but I have made a decision. I shall of course talk to the hon. Gentleman afterwards.

Clause 2 makes similar provisions for Wales, as the hon. Member for Caernarfon (Mr. Wigley) will know. Clause 3 includes the necessary secondary legislation governing the conduct of the referendum. An Order in Council, subject to affirmative resolution in both Houses, will be laid, and the draft will be made available the week after the Whit recess. We are happy to consider comments on the draft received by the middle of June, which can be taken into account before final orders are laid.

Clause 4 excludes the possibility of legal proceedings to question a referendum result certified by counting officers. That follows the precedent set in all the other legislation dealing with referendums. I am assured that only the most devious of minds would see conspiracy behind a safeguard against protracted and unnecessary potential litigation.

Clause 5 will provide for the payment of charges and expenses of returning officers and chief counting officers. It also allows expenditure for preparatory work. We believe that it is a prudent measure to maintain momentum, so that a Scottish Parliament and a Welsh Assembly can meet quickly after the first elections. It also deals with matters such as the acquisition, refurbishment and design of buildings, with planning needs and with other romantic matters of that type. Its provisions will be used only if there is a positive outcome to the referendums, and, for significant expenditure, only after the successful Second Reading of a devolution Bill.

I know that we shall be hearing a great deal about the provisions of clause 5—the tone has already been set by the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks, on 16 May. On that evidence, the Opposition seem to be rather over-staffed with hon. Members of vision and wide horizons, who are sadly fixated by the comparatively minor expenditure specified in the explanatory and financial memorandum. It is a type of parliamentary pump approach—which blows up to fill the foreground of what should be a great constitutional debate on comparatively limited matters.

As the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks will know, the costs specified in the explanatory and financial memorandum are relatively modest and are dwarfed by the potential benefits. In Scotland, the cost of the referendum will be less than £1 per head. Moreover,

the transitional—or paving—costs, which we do not believe will be as high as the specified upper limit, will be under £5 per head. That is in the context of a budget of £14 billion.

Mr. Heald: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Dewar: I will finish now.

Mr. Hague rose—

Mr. Dewar: I shall give way.

Mr. Hague: In the interests of clarity, is the right hon. Gentleman telling us that the costs of the referendums will be drawn from the Scottish and Welsh blocks?

Mr. Dewar: The right hon. Gentleman will see in the Bill that the funds will come from the Consolidated Fund. Perhaps we can take the matter from that point. I should tell him, because I think that it is important, that the referendum costs will be less than one thirtieth of 1 per cent. of the Scottish Office's annual budget. He should look at the £18 million to £25 million, which is the cost band for provision of paving expenditure, and compare it—to give only one example—with the £30 million or so that was lost, in a definitive sense, through the former Government's unwise investment in Health Care International, a private hospital in Clydebank. I appeal to him to raise issues of importance, but to try also to maintain some sense of perspective. If not, he will diminish only himself.

The Bill's schedules simply set out the layout and content of the ballot papers.

I have provided a rough Cook's tour of the Bill. I apologise for the length of my speech—I have perhaps been over-generous in allowing interventions, but there have been persistent attempts to intervene.

I have real hopes for the referendum campaign. In a sense, the Bill is only a mechanism. The reality—the consequences that will flow from it—should be an all-Scotland debate on issues of real importance. A similar debate should occur in Wales. I hope that the debate will have real public involvement and that there will be a sense of excitement. It will be a test not only of whether a Parliament in Scotland and an Assembly in Wales would bring better government, but of the type of Parliament and Assembly and of the range of powers that they should have.

The Bill should be a part of the process of rebuilding confidence and it will, I hope, return some faith to our democratic agenda. It is about whether people should be trusted with decisions about their own future, and I hope that the House will endorse it.

4.28 pm

Mr. Michael Howard (Folkestone and Hythe): I beg to move, To leave out from "That" to the end of the Question, and to add instead thereof:

"this House declines to give a Second Reading to the Referendums (Scotland and Wales) Bill because it would ask voters to give blanket approval to proposals in advance of legislation being published, debated, amended or agreed; and believes that such referendums should only be held after full and detailed scrutiny of the legislation in question on the floor of the House of Commons."

[Mr. Michael Howard]

I congratulate the Secretary of State for Scotland and the Secretary of State for Wales on their appointments, and the Labour party on its electoral success in Scotland and in Wales. If there is a silver lining for Conservative Members—it is certainly not very much of one—it is that there can no longer by any doubting us when we say that we are in favour of the first-past-the-post voting system out of genuine principle. In Wales, we won the second largest number of votes, but we were left without any seats. In Scotland, half a million Tory voters failed to secure parliamentary representation, so no one can accuse us of favouring the current system out of selfish party advantage.

Although Labour has won a famous victory, it does not follow that it has won a secure mandate on the question before the House. The Secretary of State for Scotland himself has pointed out previously and today that Scottish and Welsh voters cast their ballots on 1 May for a multiplicity of reasons other than devolution. I do not find the right hon. Gentleman's favourite reason the most persuasive, but he might not expect me to agree with him on that. Even if devolution had been the sole issue on polling day, no specific models of constitutional change could be said to have won popular endorsement.

Let us take Scotland first. Labour began by saying that, if elected, it would move to create a Scottish Parliament on the model proposed by the Scottish Constitutional Convention. The Prime Minister then casually informed the Scottish Labour party that there would be a referendum first. We then learned that there would be two referendums; then that there would need to be only one referendum after all, but with two questions.

By that time, the people of Scotland might justly have felt that they were being taken somewhat for granted. That was not the end of the matter. Any hopes that the launch of Labour's manifesto would clarify the position were short-lived. Having pledged itself to a Parliament with tax-raising powers, Labour then said that it would not use those powers.

Next, we were told that the Scottish Parliament would be like an English parish council. Finally, as if all that were not enough, the Prime Minister announced that sovereignty would rest not with this House and not even with Her Majesty, but in his own person—*l'état c'est Blair*! What have the people of Scotland just voted for—a tax-raising assembly, an English parish council or a new sun king?

What are the people of Wales being asked to vote for? Unlike the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Assembly will not have tax-raising powers. It will not have the power to legislate on local government, on health, on education, on housing or on transport. If the Scottish Parliament is like an English parish council, how would the Prime Minister describe the Welsh Assembly? Would he describe it as a meeting of church wardens?

On Friday, the Secretary of State for Scotland described the notion of a Scottish Parliament without tax-raising powers as "an odd non sequitur". In April, the Secretary of State for Wales described the notion of a Welsh Assembly with tax-raising powers as economic illiteracy, so what are we to believe? Are we to believe that the Secretary of State for Wales is a non sequitur, or that the Secretary of State for Scotland is economically illiterate?

Why are the Government determined to foist on the people of Wales a settlement that they regard as second-rate in Scotland?

We support the Government in their stated aim of strengthening the Union, and we share their ambition to give the Scots and the Welsh more say over their own affairs, but the Bill is no way in which to achieve either of those aims. Its objectives, I fear, are somewhat more cynical and more selfish.

In their determination to maximise their majority in this House, the Government are wilfully ignoring the danger that their proposals pose to the long-term unity of the country. The Labour party wants to have its cake and eat it. It wants a devolved Parliament in Scotland, and it wants to keep a disproportionate block of Scottish Members of Parliament in this House to drive through legislation for England and for Wales.

The simplicity of the proposed ballot papers as set out in the Bill masks the fact that all the most important questions have been left unanswered. Is it right, for example, that Scots and Welshmen residing outside their homelands should be disfranchised? Is it right that the rest of the kingdom should be left unconsulted about a profound change to its government? Do the questions on the proposed ballot paper refer to a Parliament and an Assembly within the United Kingdom or outside it? In other words, should supporters of complete separation vote yes or no?

What will be the position of the Scottish and Welsh Secretaries of State? How will they occupy themselves in the Cabinet? Will they make the tea or do some photocopying, or will they just sit sniggering together like middle-aged versions of Beavis and Butthead?

What of the Barnett formula on funding for Scotland if tax-raising powers are granted to the Edinburgh Parliament? What will be the relationship between Members of this House and Members of the devolved Assemblies who sit for the same geographical areas? How can hon. Members representing Scottish and Welsh seats become Ministers for portfolios that fall within the jurisdiction of the devolved legislatures? How would the position of the Minister of Transport, for example, be tenable? Those questions demand answers.

I am delighted that, after an uncharacteristic period of silence—coinciding quite by chance, no doubt, with the run-up to the general election—the hon. Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) has again found his voice. I am sure that he will not mind me reminding the House of the question that he has made famous.

Under Labour's plans, Scottish Members would continue to sit and vote in this House on all English and most Welsh matters, but English and Welsh Members would have no commensurate say over Scottish matters. Why should the Secretary of State for Scotland be able to decide the future of grant-maintained schools in my constituency of Folkestone and Hythe, when I have no say over schools in Glasgow?

The manifest unfairness of that arrangement has attracted a great deal of comment, but the other half of the question has received less attention: why should Scottish Members continue to legislate for England and Wales when they are to have no say over the affairs of Scotland? Under the Government's proposals, Scottish Members would have less say on Scottish matters than on English matters. If they were petitioned by their constituents about

the state of Scottish schools, they would have to reply, "Nothing to do with me." Their constituents might justly wonder whether their salaries—

Mr. Martin O'Neill (Ochil): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Is it in order for the Home Secretary—[*Interruption.*—sorry, the former Home Secretary—to talk about the substance of devolution, when we are discussing the mechanics of the referendum proposals?

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): I do not believe that that is out of order, and he is not the Home Secretary.

Mr. Howard: I understand why Labour Members do not want these questions raised, and why they do not want concentration focused on them, but this is essential background to the question that the House has to debate today and tomorrow.

Mr. Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green): Will my right hon. and learned Friend give way?

Mr. Howard: I shall give way in just a moment; I just want to finish the point that I am making.

In the light of the questions that I have just posed, the Scottish constituents of Labour Members—indeed, of all hon. Members—might justly wonder whether their salaries should be cut to reflect the reduced role that they would have.

Mr. Duncan Smith: Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that the point of order that has just been raised is at the nub of the problem? The hon. Member for Ochil (Mr. O'Neill) complained that my right hon. and learned Friend was raising those difficult issues, but the Government have asked us not to raise any of those points. We are to ask the people to vote on something that they know nothing about, in the absence of any debate.

Mr. Howard: My hon. Friend is right. I shall develop that point in a moment or two.

Mr. John Home Robertson (East Lothian): The right hon. and learned Gentleman has been making something of what used to be called the West Lothian question. Will he address what I call the East Lothian question? How could he justify a situation in which he and his colleagues voted to impose the poll tax on my constituents in East Lothian and on other Scottish constituencies at a time when it did not apply to their constituents?

Mr. Howard: Because that was a decision taken by the Parliament of the United Kingdom, which has jurisdiction to legislate for every part of the United Kingdom.

Mr. Thomas Graham (West Renfrewshire): The right hon. and learned Gentleman will be aware that the Labour party and the Liberal Democrats in Scotland argued clearly for a constitutional convention. We also argued clearly for a referendum. Is he aware that there was a meeting of the remnants of the Conservative party in a wigwam, where they had a pow-wow, but that all their peace pipes were broken? The Tory party is split. It does

not know whether to support devolution or a referendum. It is time he realised that the problem for the Tories has not gone away. They are so split asunder that they will never rule Scotland.

Mr. Howard: I always enjoy the hon. Gentleman's colourful language, but his question is somewhat remote from the point that I was addressing.

Mr. James Wallace (Orkney and Shetland): The right hon. and learned Gentleman has made great play of the so-called West Lothian question. Can he tell the House how often, during the 50 years when Ulster Unionist Members sat on Conservative Benches, took the Conservative Whip and served in Conservative Governments when the Stormont Parliament was in existence, the Conservative party ever complained that those hon. Members were able to vote on matters relating to West Lothian and West Bromwich, but not on those relating to west Belfast?

Mr. Howard: There are at least two answers to that question. As has been acknowledged on several occasions, not least by the Secretary of State for Defence, who was in his place earlier, it is unwise to draw analogies with Northern Ireland, because circumstances there are extremely different. The hon. Gentleman will be aware, however, that, in 1921, when the legislation that made the change to which he has referred was introduced, there was a commensurate reduction in the number of Members from Northern Ireland. It may well be sensible for us to explore that point in due course.

Mr. Donald Anderson (Swansea, East): The right hon. and learned Gentleman is doing a skilful job of showing that devolution involves a number of complex points of principle, but he seems to have learnt nothing from the election. Was it not a wholly untenable position for his party to hold that we have reached such a point of perfection in our constitution that there should be no change in Scotland, and that there was no such thing as the Scottish question? Was not that the basis of the total rejection of his party in Scotland?

Mr. Howard: No, it was not. Had the hon. Gentleman been listening, he would have noticed that, a few minutes ago, the Secretary of State acknowledged that people vote in general elections for a multiplicity of reasons, as they did on 1 May, and that one cannot draw the inference that the hon. Gentleman sought to draw.

Moreover, it has never been the case that we have resisted change. As was pointed out earlier, the previous Secretary of State for Scotland, the former right hon. Member for Stirling, was responsible for significant change in the arrangements for governing Scotland, so the hon. Gentleman has completely misrepresented both the result of the election and the position of the Conservative party.

Mr. Salmond: Two of the other Conservative leadership contenders have indicated their support for a blocking mechanism, a threshold or a 50 per cent. rule, according to the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood). Does the right hon. and learned

[*Mr. Salmond*]

Gentleman support such a blocking device, and, if so, would it apply to any European referendum that might be introduced?

Mr. Howard: The hon. Gentleman will have to restrain himself. In due course, he will see exactly what amendments the Opposition table, on this and other issues. We shall comply in full with the rules of the House, and we shall give due notice to the hon. Gentleman and to the Government when we table those amendments.

Mrs. Maria Fyfe (Glasgow, Maryhill): Will the right hon. and learned Gentleman give way?

Mr. Howard: No, I must make a little progress.

I was dealing with the reaction of the people of Scotland and the right hon. and hon. Members who represent them to the proposals that lie behind the question before the House today. As for the people of England and Wales, their reaction is likely to be even stronger.

The Labour party has shown itself ready to promote its party interests, quite regardless of the damage caused to the integrity of the United Kingdom. It seems determined to retain the over-representation of Scottish Members in the House. It does not take much imagination to foresee the mood in England if that majority were used to bulldoze through policies that were unpopular with the English electorate. That is precisely why the cynical proposals outlined by the Secretary of State menace the integrity and harmony of the United Kingdom.

Mr. Cash: In the context of what I have just termed the United Kingdom question, and considering the reality of what will happen in the dismembering process, does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that the question is not entirely for England or for Wales, or indeed for Scotland, but for the United Kingdom as a whole, having regard to the interests of those in Northern Ireland, for example, who will also be affected by the logical consequences to which the Bill will lead?

Mr. Howard: My hon. Friend raises an important point. He, too, will have to wait and see what amendments are tabled when we debate the substance of the matter in due course.

I turn to the nub of our argument against the Bill's proposals—that part of the Secretary of State's speech where he was at his most defensive and his least convincing. The proposed change would be the greatest change in our nation's constitution at least since the Government of Ireland Act 1920, and possibly since the Act of Union itself in 1707.

It is right that the electorate should be consulted before changes of such magnitude are implemented, but they should be asked for their opinion when all our questions have been answered, when all the details are known, when the legislation has been finally tempered and scrutinised in the House, and when Parliament has debated and decided. Instead, the Government are breaking with constitutional precedent by holding a referendum before voters are allowed to know the final shape of the

proposals. The people of Scotland and Wales will be asked to give their consent to devolution in principle and to trust Ministers to sort out the details afterwards.

Indeed, things are even worse than that. The Government intend to curtail Parliament's ability to perform its proper function. A pre-legislative referendum is designed to pre-empt parliamentary debate. It is not a new device. The device was the hallmark of continental dictatorships between the wars. European tyrants used the plebiscite to sideline their Parliaments; they used it to suppress the rights and liberties of their citizens. That is the model that the new Labour Government have decided to follow.

Why the Government's reluctance to follow constitutional precedent? Why their unseemly haste? Could it perhaps have something to do with the memory of what happened the last time that the proposals were put to the people?

In 1979, the referendums were rightly held after the legislation had been finalised, so that voters were able to decide on very specific proposals. Both in Scotland and in Wales, support ebbed during the referendum campaigns, as people came to appreciate what the proposals would actually mean. In my native Wales, opinion polls before the campaign were running at 4:1 in favour of a devolved Assembly, but on polling day, there was a 4:1 vote against it. People's enthusiasm for devolution waned when they saw that it would spawn expensive new bureaucracies and cause bitter disputes between the nations of the United Kingdom.

Mr. Ian Bruce: Does my right hon. and learned Friend get a clue from the Bill about who is supposed to be paying for the Scottish Parliament? Is not expenditure—by the Scottish Office, the Welsh Office and central Government—on Scotland and Wales very much higher than on England? Despite that additional expenditure, general taxpayers are being asked to pay for the referendum. I suspect that they will also have to pay for the cost of the additional Parliament, the additional level of government. Should we not know now, before we English Members of Parliament have to vote on the matter, exactly who is supposed to be paying for it?

Mr. Howard: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend. It was noteworthy during the Secretary of State's speech that he declined to answer a direct question put to him by my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid-Kent (Mr. Rowe), who suggested that his Kent constituents would be paying the cost of the referendum, but just a minute or two later confirmed that that would indeed be precisely so.

The reason why the Government are determined to hold the referendum before the voters can see the details of the legislation is that they fear that otherwise people will reach the same conclusion as they reached in 1979. That is why the Government are resorting to this unprecedented and anti-democratic approach.

The Secretary of State was silent—until pressed in answer to a question, when he was non-committal—about whether the main devolution legislation would be taken on the Floor of the House—a procedure described as game-playing by the Prime Minister during the debate on the Gracious Speech last week. We believe that that should happen, and I hope that the Secretary of State for Wales will deal with the point when he winds up tomorrow.

The Union of Scotland, England, Wales and Northern Ireland is based on a community of interests, a shared history, and an essential friendship between its constituent peoples. Like the relationship between Boswell and Johnson, that friendship can sometimes be prickly, but it is old and genuine. Its flavour is captured in the words of the highlander at Dunkirk, who told his comrades that, if the English surrendered too, it could be a long war. By its selfish and hurried pursuit of short-term advantage, Labour has jeopardised that relationship. A Union that has held fast for centuries could begin to fray in a matter of months.

The practical advantages of the Union are as much in evidence now as ever. Scotland and Wales have benefited enormously from massive inward investment during the Conservative Administration, including the LG plant in Newport, which is the largest single instance of foreign investment in Europe. The talent and industry of the Scots and my Welsh compatriots have enriched our island.

United, Britain has a strong voice in the councils of the world. Can anyone imagine that our constituent nations, if separated, would retain that influence? The House should be in no doubt that there would be a real danger of separation if the Government's proposals were to be implemented in their current form.

Mr. Stephen Day (Cheadle): I am sure that many in the House, on both sides, hold their Britishness dear. I count myself among them. However sincere the Government may be about their desire to maintain the Union, the danger at the heart of the proposals is that no union can be dissolved or changed unilaterally by one partner. Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that the issue needs to be taken out of the party political battle, for all parties to consider the effects of constitutional change on all the constituent parts of the United Kingdom? My constituents matter as much as those of hon. Members from Scotland.

Mr. Howard: My hon. Friend raises an important point, and his constituents and mine are likely to be vitally affected by the Government's proposals. He raises an important aspect of the proposals.

Mr. Paul Flynn (Newport, West): The right hon. and learned Gentleman referred to the LG investment in my constituency, and suggested that it would not happen. Does he not realise that LG was fully aware that a Labour Government were on the way, and that devolution was part of our promises? LG sees the investment in Newport as one of the fruits of devolution. The previous Prime Minister has admitted that LG came to Wales primarily because of the work of the Welsh Development Agency, a devolved body created by a former Labour Government.

Mr. Howard: The Welsh Development Agency has done notable work, not least during the time that my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague) was the Secretary of State. It is a far cry from arguing that the Welsh Development Agency played an important part in LG coming to Newport, which it clearly did, to arguing that the investment is a vote of confidence in the proposals for administrative and legislative devolution.

I return to the point raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Cheadle (Mr. Day). The ingredients necessary for a bitter and acrimonious breakdown

between the constituent parts of the United Kingdom are all there in the legislation that lies behind the question before the House today. They include the anomalous position of Welsh and Scottish Ministers; the unfair representation of Welsh and Scottish Members in the House; the lack of clear delineation between the spheres of authority of this Parliament and the devolved legislatures; the opportunity for intrusive judicial review; and, in the case of Scotland, the financial tensions that will inevitably be caused by the granting of tax-raising powers to the Scottish Parliament while Scotland continues to be generously over-funded by the Westminster Administration.

Mrs. Fyfe: Does the former Home Secretary realise that his credibility as a true and perfect democrat was destroyed for ever when he used a large Tory majority to impose the poll tax on Scotland alone? There are people in Scotland who will never forget that. It is one reason why there is not one Conservative Member left in Scotland today.

Mr. Howard: I have already answered that question. However, if we want to resume fighting those battles of long ago, the hon. Lady will remember that the degree of discontent with the previous rating system in Scotland, which led to those proposals, was even more intense than the discontent in England and Wales. That is why, in those far-off days, we legislated for Scotland first.

Mr. Dewar: When challenged by my hon. Friends the Members for East Lothian (Mr. Home Robertson) and for Glasgow, Maryhill (Mrs. Fyfe) about the poll tax, the right hon. and learned Gentleman answered that it was legitimised because it was brought about by an act of the sovereign Westminster Parliament, which represented every part of the United Kingdom. If this sovereign Westminster Parliament, which also represents every part of the United Kingdom, decides, for the better governance of the country, to set up a Parliament in Edinburgh to deal with specifically Scottish domestic affairs, will that not also be legitimised?

Mr. Howard: It will not be legitimised, for the following reason. *[Interruption.]* If the right hon. Gentleman will listen, he will readily see why. It is accepted in all parts of the House—perhaps not all, because the Liberal Democrats do not accept it, but it is certainly common ground between the Government and the Opposition—that, before legitimacy can be achieved, there should be a referendum on the present proposals, in addition to legislation passed by this Parliament.

What is at issue today is the timing of that referendum. If it took place after the legislation had been fully and finally approved by the House, there would be a great deal more point to the question that the Secretary of State for Scotland asked me.

It is precisely because the Government do not propose a referendum after the legislation, after all the questions have been answered and after the voters have seen the specific details of what is proposed, that they will not provide their proposals with the legitimacy that they might otherwise have acquired. That is the answer to the right hon. Gentleman's question.

I appeal to Labour Members to reflect on the consequences of what they propose to do. Can they justify putting the Union in peril for party political gain?

[Mr. Howard]

The Opposition will do all we can to prevent the legislation from being passed in its present ill-advised and divisive form. There must be time for the detailed legislation to be considered before the referendums are held.

The Bill would allow one of the greatest changes in our island's history to be decided by a bare majority of Welsh and Scottish voters, possibly on a very low turnout, without their having seen the details of the legislation, and without the people of England having been consulted.

In the deliberately short time that the Government have allowed us, we shall argue vigorously to convince Scottish and Welsh voters that devolution on such a model threatens the break-up of our country. We Conservatives know that patriotism is not the same as parochialism. We are proud to stand as the party not only of the Union, but of the constitution and of parliamentary sovereignty.

The Bill purports to give the people choice, but in fact it denies them choice, by denying them the information on which to base their judgment. It asks them for their unconditional votes. We shall resist the proposals in the House and oppose them in Wales and Scotland. We stand ready to take our fight to the people.

4.58 pm

Miss Anne Begg (Aberdeen, South): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to make my maiden speech as part of this historic debate. The issue of Scottish devolution is close to my heart. What an honour it is to speak in the debate that will eventually lead to the setting up of a Scottish Parliament.

Now that Labour is finally and firmly in government, we can show not only the people of Scotland but the cynics and doom merchants that Labour will deliver a Scottish Parliament, if that is truly what the people want—hence the Referendums (Scotland and Wales) Bill. Before we undertake such constitutional change, we must be absolutely sure that it is

"the settled will of the Scottish people",

as the late John Smith said.

The Parliament that Labour proposes to set up in Edinburgh will, I am sure, bring great benefits to the north-east of Scotland and to my constituents in Aberdeen, South in particular. The voting system will ensure that no one area in Scotland will dominate the Scottish Parliament, and the people of Aberdeen will have a more direct say in how their health and education services should be run. Aberdeen was ahead of the game when it came to providing health care for the whole community. Foresterhill hospital was built before the NHS was established from money raised by public subscription—it really was a public hospital.

Aberdeen is also a beautiful city. When the sun shines, it positively sparkles with the light reflected off the grey granite. There is much pride in our civic amenities in Aberdeen. Anyone driving into Aberdeen, South towards the Bridge of Dee will notice the mass of blooms—crocuses and daffodils in spring, or roses down the central reservation of the dual carriageway in summer. It is an impressive sight. A separate category had to be created for Aberdeen in the Britain in Bloom competition, because we kept winning year after year, and we thought that we ought to give others a chance.

It is no surprise that Aberdeen attracts a lot of tourists, many of whom visit the Duthie park winter gardens—a haven of tranquillity and peace in a busy, thriving city. For most people, Aberdeen is a thriving city. It still has a busy fishing port, and many of my constituents work in the fish processing industry. The biggest change to Aberdeen's economy and prosperity was the arrival of oil. I am glad to say that the oil industry is still buoyant in Aberdeen, especially as initial predictions were that the oil would soon run out. It has not yet, but the city must be ready in the future if there is a change in our economic circumstances.

Inevitably, Aberdeen, South has its share of social problems. The rising threat and menace of drugs are ever present and, even in Aberdeen, many young people find it hard to get a job. Those are two issues that the new Labour Government will begin to address.

It is in its parliamentary representation that Aberdeen, South has had the greatest instability. Any Member who thought that he or she might have a job for life after winning Aberdeen, South was quickly disabused of that notion. It was my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland who started the process by unseating Lady Tweedsmuir in 1966. He was not to last, but I am glad to see that he has made good now.

Iain Sproat came next, in 1970. I have a debt of gratitude to pay to Mr. Sproat over a telephone bill. At the time, I was an impoverished student, sharing a flat in Aberdeen, South with other equally poor students. The telephone phone bill which arrived obviously was not ours—it was so large that even someone on a Member of Parliament's pay could not have afforded it. Would British Telecom, or its predecessor, accept that we could not have run up such a large bill? Of course not. But it was a letter to our Member of Parliament, Iain Sproat, that finally got the issue sorted out. I can now publicly thank him.

Iain Sproat was not to last, either. Next came Gerry Malone. He was defeated for the first time in 1987 by my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen, Central (Mr. Doran). The fact that my hon. Friend now represents a different constituency will give the House a clue as to his staying power in Aberdeen, South. In 1992, he was replaced by Raymond Robertson—my opponent at the election. Although obviously upset by his defeat, Raymond was always polite and courteous towards me. Aberdeen, South has seen-sawed between the Conservatives and Labour, so there is a lesson there for me not to become complacent. However, there is a crumb of comfort. Aberdeen, South has obviously been a good training ground for new Members of Parliament. All my male predecessors have reached either ministerial or shadow ministerial positions—not, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that I am putting down a marker for my own advancement.

To return to the subject of this debate, I am sorry to report that the procedures of the House have been usurped by the local Aberdeen evening newspaper, the *Evening Express*, which is the sister paper of that other well-known news organ of the north-east, *The Press and Journal*. I have to dispel the myth about the parochial nature of the latter—it was not the newspaper that ran the story earlier this century with the banner headline "North-East man drowns at sea", with the much smaller sub-headline "Titanic sinks".

Last Friday evening, the *Evening Express* published the results of a phone-in poll which it ran asking readers whether they wanted a Scottish Parliament. I know that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland will be waiting in anticipation to find out what verdict was given by his old stomping ground—he still keeps very much in touch with what goes on in Aberdeen. The majority of the readers decided that they did want a Scottish Parliament after all. That is all right then—I feel that I am now speaking for my constituents in speaking in support of a referendum. We cannot just depend on newspaper polls, however. We must also ask the people directly, and we will do so through the referendum proposed in the Bill.

I began by saying that this was a historic debate. I am proud to be the new Member for Aberdeen, South and I have to thank the House authorities, my colleagues and Madam Speaker for making it possible for me to operate in the House just like everyone else. They have all made it possible for me to play my part as a member of the new Labour Government—a Government who will bring about real change in the lives of the people and real change in the way in which we govern Scotland.

5.6 pm

Mr. Michael Ancram (Devizes): I congratulate the hon. Member for Aberdeen, South (Miss Begg) on her maiden speech. I have not heard all the maiden speeches of all the hon. Members who have represented Aberdeen, South, but I have heard quite a few. I have also had a somewhat chequered political career and I know what she is talking about—security of tenure. On behalf of all hon. Members I think that I can say that her speech was remarkable in its clarity and its passion and we look forward to hearing many more speeches from her in due course. I also thank her for her words about Raymond Robertson, who was my parliamentary private secretary in Northern Ireland and was a great support to me in my work. He will be pleased to hear the kind words that she spoke about him.

This has been a strange debate. Listening to the Secretary of State, I cannot help feeling that he does not really want the referendum. It is somehow unnecessary—it has been forced upon him by circumstances and he really lives in that period of the Labour party in February 1996 when the Secretary of State for Defence, the right hon. Member for Hamilton, South (Mr. Robertson), then the shadow Secretary of State for Scotland, was making it clear that there were no proposals for a referendum. Indeed, as I understand it, he went on to say that the election of a Labour Government with the proposal in their manifesto would be the only mandate necessary.

The House of Commons Library is sometimes a useful source of information. I commend it to the Secretary of State for Scotland. He will find from that source again that, some nine months later, the right hon. Member for Hamilton, South decided that there should be a referendum: he went further and suggested that there should be two—the second would trigger the tax-varying powers of a Scottish Parliament. At that time, according to the information that has been made available to me by—

Mr. Salmond: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Perhaps you can tell me why the right hon. Gentleman is speaking from the Back Benches today,

when he was speaking from the Front Bench on a constitutional issue on Friday. We cannot criticise decisions from the Chair, but we hope that they are made in the full awareness that there are no Conservative Members in Scotland or Wales.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The responsibility that a particular Member takes on a particular day is not a matter for the Chair.

Mr. Ancram: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I understood that, for all the sadness of losing office, one of the privileges of being in opposition was that one could speak from the Back Benches in a way that was not possible when in government.

I want to make what I consider to be relevant points about the Bill. I was referring to the way in which the Government's policy on referendums has changed over the past 12 months, and pointing out that at one moment it was intended that there should be two referendums, which was described by the right hon. Gentleman who is now the Prime Minister as a

"mature and sensible decision of the Scottish Executive Committee."

He went on to say:

"This decision brings a Labour Government and a Scottish Parliament that much closer."

A week later, the present Secretary of State for Defence said that there would be only one referendum, not two, as there was no support for that policy. I have the feeling that one reason why the Secretary of State for Scotland was so unconvincing today is that he would rather have no referendum and proceed straight away to legislation to be passed by the heavy majority that the Government command in the House.

Mr. Rhodri Morgan (Cardiff, West): It would perhaps be for the benefit of the House if the right hon. Gentleman were to explain whether his status as a representative of the views of the official Opposition has changed since Friday. Is he speaking as a Back Bencher or as a Front Bencher sitting on the Back Benches merely for convenience?

Mr. Ancram: It must be obvious to the hon. Gentleman that when one speaks from the Back Benches one speaks as a Back Bencher. I am making my own personal points today, and I shall make them as I ought.

Mr. Wallace: Perhaps the right hon. Gentleman can clarify whether on Friday, when he spoke from the Front Bench, he was an official spokesman. Has he been sacked in the meantime? As the constitutional issues are the same, do the official Opposition know whether they are forwards, backwards or sideways, and do they have any clue at all what they are doing?

Mr. Ancram: Again, if the hon. Gentleman were to look at Friday's debate and compare it with today's, he would discover that the previous debate was about all the constitutional proposals in the Queen's Speech, while today's is about a single issue.

Mr. Jon Owen Jones (Lord Commissioner to the Treasury): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. In my experience as an Opposition Whip for four years,

[*Mr. Jon Owen Jones*]

a Front Bencher was never called from the Back Benches if another Back Bencher was available to speak. I do not know whether the precedent has changed, but I would be grateful if you could consider the matter.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I am not sure that a firm precedent is being set, but I shall take note of what the hon. Gentleman says and investigate the matter. He is also in danger of confusing me, because a moment ago he was on the Front Bench and now he is on the Back Benches.

Mr. Ancram: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

The first specific point that I want to put to the Secretary of State for Scotland concerns the fact that, as I understood him, he was asserting that preceding the referendum a White Paper would be published, which would be sufficient to explain to the people of Scotland and Wales that for which they would be asked to vote either for or against.

If the question to be asked of the Scottish and Welsh people in a referendum is whether they support the proposals for a Parliament and an Assembly as set out in the White Paper, why do not the questions as proposed in the Bill set that out? The question in schedule 1 says:

"I agree that there should be a Scottish Parliament".

not a Scottish Parliament as set out in the White Paper, and the same goes for the Welsh Assembly.

If the Secretary of State for Scotland addresses his powerful legal mind to that matter, he will immediately see that the question being asked would be as relevant to a Scottish Parliament within an independent Scotland as to one on a devolved basis. I can only suspect that he has set out the proposition in that way because he does not want to be bound by the White Paper as endorsed by a referendum and wishes, if necessary, to be able to alter the legislation as it goes through Parliament and vary it according to circumstances that might arise, without the necessity of going back to the Scottish or Welsh people to ask for re-endorsement of a changed scheme.

If the Secretary of State does not mean that, surely the only other possibility is that he has sufficient contempt for Parliament to say that no changes can be made in the legislation as it goes through Parliament because the endorsement, in his view, will have precluded it. That question goes to the very heart of his proposals. Before the Bill becomes law, we must know precisely what the people of Scotland and Wales are being asked to endorse.

The Secretary of State referred to the situation in Northern Ireland. I want to offer him a word of caution. We have a bipartisan policy on Northern Ireland, and the most important thing about such a policy is that we should understand it. Today he has in effect suggested that it was proposed by the previous Government—and therefore, under a bipartisan policy, by the present Government—that a White Paper should be drawn up and then put to the people of Northern Ireland in a referendum; that is the analogy that he drew with what is happening now.

The right hon. Gentleman referred to the framework document, but that is not a White, or even a Green Paper; it is an understanding between two Governments that was to be used as the basis for parties to try to reach agreement among themselves. It was made absolutely clear that it

was not the framework document that would be put to the people of Northern Ireland in a referendum, but any detailed agreement arrived at by the parties either with or without the help of that document.

I put that point with a good deal of force, because there is a suspicion in Northern Ireland that British Governments intend to produce White Papers and go over the heads of the political parties by putting them to the people in a referendum. I hope that the Secretary of State will take this opportunity to make it clear—as he failed to do in his reply to my intervention—that that is not the Government's policy, any more than it was ours.

Mr. Dewar: I am happy to oblige the right hon. Gentleman, because I certainly do not want to get into difficulties over the matter; if he checks the record he will see that I referred to the triple lock and to discussions followed by a referendum followed by legislation. I merely made the point that, when circumstances make it sensible, the opposition in principle can be set aside and we can have pre-legislative referendums. That was my only point, and I believe that I have been precise about it.

It is possibly fair that the right hon. Gentleman should have regard to the fact that the ballot paper is to contain a preliminary sentence that says:

"Parliament has decided to consult people in Scotland on the Government's proposals for a Scottish Parliament".

It is therefore a little unfair of him to take the question out of the context of the ballot paper.

Mr. Ancram: Is the Secretary of State therefore suggesting that he would accept an amendment to make that clear in the propositions themselves? If not, perhaps he would explain why not. We may table an amendment to that effect and see whether he will accept it.

The whole principle of what was being done in Northern Ireland was that the parties would come to an agreement that would be detailed in all respects and would be a matter not only for political parties but for two Governments, and that that would then be put to a referendum. That agreement would be reached—this is germane to the second point that I want to put to the Secretary of State—not by a simple majority but on the basis of what is called sufficiency of consensus.

Sufficiency of consensus was designed to ensure that any agreement that was to be put to the people of Northern Ireland in a referendum would have the broad agreement of the representatives of both parts of the community. That is far wider and broader than a simple majority. The Secretary of State raised the subject of Northern Ireland, and I take him up on it.

The second concern of Conservative Members is that we are not talking about sufficiency of consensus, or even a simple majority of those able to vote in Scotland. Under the Bill, assent can be given by a simple majority of whoever bothers to vote in a referendum. If this referendum is to have any value, its outcome must be credible. The Secretary of State would not dissent from that. In his view, would a poll of 10, 20, 30, or 40 per cent. deliver a sufficiency of consensus? In terms of what I have been working on for the past four years, it would not.

The Secretary of State must be very conscious of the fact that, if any progress or process is to follow on a result emanating from such a referendum and move forward

with any chance of survival, it must be based on what would be accepted by the people of the United Kingdom as a whole as a credible outcome. He cannot duck the threshold question. What does he believe is the minimum level of voter participation in Scotland that would deliver credibility? I do not believe that, in his heart of hearts, he thinks that anything under 50 per cent. could deliver it. I hope that the Government will deal with that in their reply.

We have discovered in this debate that the cost of the referendums—I am not entering into the next stage, the preparation for assemblies—is to come from the Consolidated Fund, which, as I understand it, is not a Scottish or Welsh block fund but a United Kingdom fund. All taxpayers in the United Kingdom therefore contribute to it. I want to make it clear beyond peradventure that the Bill is telling my constituents that they will not be allowed a say in the outcome of the referendum but that they will have to pay for it. Under the principle of no taxation without representation, I believe that that has constitutional significance that the Government should address.

Mr. O'Neill: Can the right hon. Gentleman explain where funding was to have come from for the constitutional arrangements that he had hoped to set in place in Northern Ireland? Would the money have been taken from the Consolidated Fund or from the Northern Ireland block grant?

Mr. Ancram: The cost of the Northern Ireland talks process, which is happening on the ground at the moment, is shared between the Northern Ireland block grant and the Irish Government, because they are the two main participants in the process. The hon. Gentleman's point has been answered in a way different from that which he expected.

It is clear that the implications of even this rather minor Bill on a referendum have not been thought through thoroughly by the Government. Enormous constitutional issues will arise from the outcome of the referendums. If they are not addressed during the passage of this legislation, those outcomes could lead to the break-up of the United Kingdom. It is for that reason that I will oppose the Bill.

5.23 pm

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): My hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen, South (Miss Begg) is the seventh Member of Parliament for that constituency whom I have known, and she delivered a remarkable speech. The first Member for Aberdeen, South whom I knew was Priscilla, Lady Tweedsmuir. She, too, was a remarkable lady. The Secretary of State, who beat her in an election in Aberdeen, South, would concede that she was a most effective Member of Parliament. The constituency has had some remarkable Members and I suspect that my hon. Friend will follow in that remarkable line.

I take my hon. Friend up on one phrase. She said that she was concerned about the settled will—the settled will—of the Scottish people. I think that that is what has to be established.

There is something that puzzles me deeply. I do not understand why it was ever thought necessary to hold referendums before legislation.

I for one have made it quite clear to anyone who would listen that I would vote for the Second Reading of a Bill—any Bill—because the matter had to be discussed. I made it clear—I do not think that anyone in the Labour party dissented from this—that at the first sign of time-wasting by the Opposition, I would vote for a guillotine because it was no part of my business to disrupt the legislative programme of a Labour Government.

What therefore is the necessity for a pre-legislative referendum at all? If it is not to put pressure on Government Members, what on earth is it for?

I have been asked about the matter everywhere. At my reselection meeting for the Linlithgow constituency Labour party and elsewhere, I have repeatedly said that I would campaign ferociously for a referendum on the one meaningful question that a referendum can ask: "Do you approve of the Scotland Act 1997 or 1998 as passed by Parliament?"

That is a precise question that covers all the eventualities.

Given the size of the Government's majority, there may not be any eventualities; there may not be many changes. However, there is an assumption that in all the parliamentary discussions there will be no changes. The House of Commons cannot be taken for granted by implication.

Certain hard issues must be sorted out. I had the good fortune to be called to speak on Friday and drew attention to some of them.

There is only one to which I go back and ask my hon. Friends to ponder. The question was first put by John Lloyd. He called it the Bury, North question. It is a serious issue. How can the Labour Member who has won Bury, North—not a constituency over-endowed with wealth—by defeating Alistair Burt go on justifying to his constituents the fact that it takes fewer than 55,000 votes to send a Scottish Member to the House of Commons but more than 68,000 votes to elect an English Member? I think that I will omit the implications, particularly the public expenditure implications, of the so-called West Lothian question. It was dubbed that by Enoch Powell, not by me. We cannot assume that that subject will not be addressed in the parliamentary discussions.

That subject must be addressed somehow or other because, above all else, we are talking about something that the Government hope will last in perpetuity, and in the form in which it is proposed.

I do not know whether the Secretary of State thinks that I fall into the category of the "horribly familiar" or the "bastards", as he put it. However, presumably it is common ground among Labour Members that what is proposed should have at least a chance of lasting.

If the proposition is to have a chance of lasting, these awkward and difficult questions must be faced up to. The place to face up to them is the Floor of the House of Commons. If it is not done here, where else is it to be done? If it is not done, the whole proposition could be unstable. That would be deeply unsatisfactory and could lead to all sorts of sournesses.

Mr. Jonathan Sayeed (Mid-Bedfordshire): The hon. Gentleman has made the important point that, in my constituency of Mid-Bedfordshire the electorate is 68,000. In most Scottish constituencies, the average size is about

[*Mr. Jonathan Sayeed*]

55,000. Therefore, does he agree that it would be right and proper for there to be a single boundary commission for the whole of the United Kingdom to equalise those numbers?

Mr. Dalyell: I cannot agree or disagree off the top of my head because it is a complex matter. It would be incautious to make *ex cathedra* statements.

That kind of issue must be faced up to on the Floor of this House. We do not know how the parliamentary process will end. It might not end in the form proposed in the White Paper. If it does not end in that form, the referendum will be putting a proposal or a set of proposals that will be different or possibly significantly different from the final outcome. It depends what comes out of the parliamentary process.

Even at this 11th hour and 59th minute I ask my right hon. and hon. Friends to reflect on whether things could be done differently. There are two reasons for that, one of which I have tried to outline. This is the question of stability, and of endorsing something that can in no sense be interpreted as fraudulent. If we have a referendum on something that is different from what is finally proposed, the referendum is surely invalidated.

The second consideration is that of entrenchment. That point has been put strongly by some members of the Linlithgow constituency Labour party who have an honourable history of being absolutely dedicated to the idea of a Scottish Parliament. If a referendum took place on a settled set of proposals after the legislation had been through the parliamentary mill and said yes, that would give it an entrenchment and at least a chance of success that it would not otherwise have.

I thank the House for my hearing.

5.32 pm

Mr. James Wallace (Orkney and Shetland): I agree with the hon. Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell), the doyen of the Scottish parliamentary group, on two matters. First, I want to congratulate the hon. Member for Aberdeen, South (Miss Begg) on a model maiden speech. She has clearly shown how quickly she has got the feel of the House and we look forward to the contribution that she will make in the coming months and years. She is right to say that hers is an unstable seat and, with the Liberal Democrats in second place, I am glad that she acknowledges that.

I also agree with the hon. Member for Linlithgow on the number of Scottish Members and the size of Scottish constituencies if we have a Scottish Parliament. We adopt the view taken by the Kilbrandon commission that there is a case for a reduction in the number of Scottish Members to about 58, 59 or 60. We cannot run away from that issue and, no doubt, there will be plenty of opportunities to debate that in the months ahead.

As the first Opposition Member from a Scottish or Welsh constituency to take part in the debate, I want to reflect on the contributions so far by the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard) and the right hon. Member for Devizes (Mr. Ancram). The right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe seemed to learn nothing from the general election campaign. His speech seemed to be a retread of those I

have heard on many occasions by the former right hon. Member for Stirling, Michael Forsyth—speeches which brought such distinguished success, or lack of it, to his party in the general election.

The right hon. Member for Devizes was today speaking from the Back Benches. I wonder whether that is because his right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe was speaking from the Front Bench whereas on Friday his right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague) was speaking from the Front Bench. Perhaps the right hon. Gentleman chooses whether to sit on the Front Bench or the Back Benches depending on which leadership candidate is in pole position on that day.

The right hon. Member for Devizes has been named as a potential shadow Secretary of State for Scotland. His speech lacked punch today and he was clearly making sure that he would not be selected for the post.

Although he is no longer in the Chamber, it is a pleasure to congratulate the Secretary of State for Scotland, the right hon. Member for Glasgow, Anniesland (Mr. Dewar), on his appointment. He has already indicated a co-operative and open approach, not least in getting on to the statute book the Scottish home rule Bill. His party, my party and a wide range of people in Scottish civic life have worked over seven or eight years to bring that project to fruition and I can assure him that, whatever our disagreements over the referendum, we will work co-operatively to bring that project to a successful conclusion.

The Secretary of State was complaining about Conservative Members talking about the cost of the referendum. He said that it will cost £5 million, less than one thirtieth of 1 per cent. of the entire Scottish Office budget. He said that they needed to lend a sense of perspective. My perspective is that it is £1 million more than the additional money that the Labour Government have found for investment in Scottish education in the coming year. They are spending more on the referendum than they are able to find to increase investment in Scottish education, which suggests that the concerns that we expressed about Scottish education during the election campaign will still be around when the referendum is long past.

A referendum did not form any part of the constitutional convention's proposals. At one stage it was considered and rejected, but it did not appear in the final scheme. Looking at the origins of why the Labour party became attached to the referendum, it was always our concern that it had the wobbles over tax. I am not claiming that it was over the principle that a Scottish Parliament should have tax-varying powers, because I have no doubt about the commitment to that principle by members of the constitutional convention. However, in the two and a half years leading up to the general election, the word "tax" seemed to make the Labour party appear like a rabbit caught in headlights. It was a word to which the focus groups reacted badly. On this matter the trumpet sounded an uncertain note.

The Labour party seemed to wobble in the face of the tax offensive by the former Secretary of State, Michael Forsyth, although it had no need to because we have seen the effectiveness of his tartan tax campaign. I suspect that, although Michael Forsyth was making no headway in Scotland, the Labour party strategists were alarmed that it

might rock middle England. It was plausible that the carefully structured strategy of not frightening the voters of middle England by not talking at all about tax could have been undermined by Tory spokesmen saying, "Look north of the border. Their proposals for tax varying"—although you can bet your life that the Tories would have talked about tax raising—"are the real Labour party proposals." The Labour party had to neutralise that and out of that came the two-question referendum. It was a policy born not of principle but of expediency. Perhaps in its campaigning strategy, it was for the Labour party a right expedient.

The right hon. Member for Hamilton, South (Mr. Robertson) was quoted in *Scotland on Sunday* on 11 February 1996 as saying:

"We have no proposals for a referendum because we want to legislate early and quickly for this outstanding commitment, and that is clear party policy."

So clear that only months later it was changed.

The story did not stop there. It was not only that on 27 June the policy was changed to a referendum with two questions. By late August, the Labour party had added not only a second question but a second referendum. The guiding hand of the then Member for Glasgow, Govan, hand in hand with the defeated Labour candidate in Edinburgh, West, Ms Lesley Hinds, managed to persuade Scotland's Labour executive into a double-lock mechanism, whereby a second referendum would be called by the Scottish Parliament before the tax-varying powers were ever used. That was such a significant event in the development of the Labour party's policy on a referendum that the now Prime Minister was moved to say:

"I welcome the mature and sensible decision of the Scottish Executive Committee."

So mature, so sensible that it was jettisoned less than seven days later. He went on to say:

"what we've actually got now is a policy that is completely firm, as it has been all the way through."

Just as former Tory Ministers shook in their shoes and looked over their shoulder when their position was described by Mrs. Thatcher as unassailable, so Ministers in the new Administration should watch out when their policy initiatives are described by the Prime Minister as mature and sensible.

As convention partners, the Liberal Democrats in no way feel bound by Labour's tactical change. We believe that the establishment of a Scottish Parliament within the United Kingdom represents—as the hon. Member for Aberdeen, South said—the settled will of the Scottish people, and that a referendum is unnecessary. The convention comprised not only the Labour party and the Liberal Democrats but trade unions and representatives of Churches, local government, ethnic groups, women's groups and Gaelic culture groups in Scotland. It produced a clear consensus, which in many respects makes us different from Wales, where over the years there has not been the same popular consent. As has been pointed out, in the 1979 referendum, the provisions of the Wales Act 1978 won the support of only 20.3 per cent. of Welsh voters.

The shadow Home Secretary said that support waned during the weeks leading up to the referendum in 1979. One of the reasons for that was perhaps that Conservatives in Scotland were told by no less an authority than Lord

Home that if they voted against the provisions of the Scotland Act 1978, they would get something better. He said that a Scottish Parliament without taxation powers would be a danger to the Union. It is important when one quotes history not to quote it selectively.

In Scotland, we could readily concur with the proposition put by a senior Labour source in *The Scotsman* on 25 April last year that

"a Scottish Parliament will be in the manifesto and the electorate can vote for it in the general election. That is all the mandate that is needed."

Indeed, 65 out of Scotland's 72 Members of Parliament—I am not sure if one should include the hon. Member for Linlithgow, but 66 if one does—have endorsed the convention scheme. Even allowing, as the Secretary of State said, for the liberal on the corner of the road in Anniesland—I do not think that there are that many in Anniesland, to be honest—who voted Liberal Democrat because he did not like the Conservatives, and even allowing for those who must have voted for us for other good and valid reasons, 65 out of 72 Members of Parliament represents a considerable mandate.

It is also important to remember that only 21 per cent. of the electorate voted for independence. Independence was a clear option. People may have voted Labour, Liberal Democrat or Conservative for a number of reasons—

Mr. Salmond: It was 22 per cent.

Mr. Wallace: Twenty-two per cent. voted for a single-issue party. I do not mean that in a demeaning way. The Scottish National party has a range of other policies, some of which we agree with, but it is a single-issue party. The hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Mr. Salmond) told people that if they wanted independence, they should vote SNP. They did not need to worry because the Labour party would make sure that there was not a Tory Government. England would deal with that and people could vote with head and heart for independence if they wanted. Twenty-two per cent. did so.

Mr. Salmond: So, might the 13 per cent. who voted Liberal Democrat have been voting for federalism?

Mr. Wallace: That might well be, or they might well have been voting along with the 45 per cent. who voted Labour and in favour of the Scottish Constitutional Convention scheme. It is nonsense to call for the option of independence on the referendum ballot paper. People had a clear option of independence on 1 May. The unequivocal option of independence was available in 72 Scottish constituencies on 1 May, and 78 per cent. of the Scottish people rejected it. When the full-time score is four to one, there is no case for extra time and no case for putting an independence option on the referendum ballot paper.

A more serious objection to the Bill relates to the second question. It was Labour's concern about tax which prompted the whole exercise. My party does not shy away from the taxation issue. We believe that taxation responsibility is what establishes the link of accountability between those elected to the Scottish Parliament and those who elect them. During the election campaign, much play was made—the shadow Home Secretary did it again

[Mr. Wallace]

today—of the Prime Minister's reference to an English parish council. I understood the Prime Minister to be saying that if an English parish council could have taxation powers, how much more compelling was the case for giving a Scottish Parliament such powers.

Taxation powers are the powers that translate an assembly into a Parliament. If the Prime Minister believes that, why is he prepared to countenance the possibility of a Parliament without taxation powers—a possibility opened up by the two-question referendum? In Friday's debate, the Secretary of State for Scotland said:

"it is odd that a directly elected Parliament with legislative powers should in some way not be trusted with the discipline and responsibility of financial powers, when such discipline and responsibility apply to every other tier of local and national Government. That is an odd non-sequitur."—[*Official Report*, 16 May 1997; Vol. 294, c. 279.]

Yet I understood the Minister for Home Affairs and Devolution, the hon. Member for Central Fife (Mr. McLeish), to say at the weekend that in the event of a yes, no vote, the Government would legislate for such a non-sequitur Parliament.

To avoid such a non-sequitur, my right hon. and hon. Friends and I will seek to amend the Bill in Committee. We believe that we could consolidate the question so that the question of tax is not ducked. The question could be along the lines, "I agree/do not agree that there should be a Scottish Parliament with tax-varying powers." Even at this late stage, I ask the Secretary of State to consider such a proposition. It removes the possibility, however remote—I share his expectation that there would be a vote for taxation powers, but even the Minister of State has accepted the possibility that there might not be—of his having to face the prospect of introducing a Bill to establish a non-sequitur assembly with less power in one critical respect than an English parish council.

I remind the House that, in moving the Government of Ireland Bill in 1912, the then Liberal Prime Minister Mr. Asquith said:

"However well we may transact . . . our common and Imperial affairs, we must perpetually bungle and mismanage the affairs of each unit."—[*Official Report*, 9 May 1912; Vol. 38, c. 700.]

We continue to bungle and mismanage the affairs of Scotland and Wales. The very fact that we have in one Bill a referendum provision for Scotland and for Wales, when there are different circumstances in each, shows an insensitivity all too typical of the House in dealing with Scottish and Welsh matters. We have already said that it is not unreasonable, given the different history of the issue in Scotland and Wales, that there might be different solutions for Scotland and Wales.

As we cannot vote on our reasoned amendment, we shall carry forward our opposition to the principle of a Scottish referendum to the debate on clause 1 stand part in Committee. We shall seek to amend the second question in the way that I have outlined.

If, however, we do not succeed in persuading the House of the wisdom of our views, there is no doubt, and let there be no doubt, that the Scottish Liberal Democrats will campaign for a yes, yes outcome in the referendum. At the end of the day, for Scotland the referendum Bill is merely a surmountable hurdle on the road to achieving in this Session a much greater prize—the home rule Parliament for which my party has campaigned for the better part of a century.

5.49 pm

Ms Rosemary McKenna (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth): First, I should like to congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen, South (Miss Begg) on her excellent maiden speech. She certainly set a very high standard for the rest of the new Members for Scotland on the Labour Benches to match.

I greatly appreciate being called to make my first speech in the debate on the Referendums (Scotland and Wales) Bill. It is the start of the parliamentary route to a Scottish Parliament for which I campaigned for many years prior to the Scotland Act 1978 and have actively pursued ever since. Today also marks the beginning of the most exciting changes to the constitution in centuries.

I want to begin by paying tribute to my predecessor, Norman Hogg, who was Member of Parliament for the constituency from 1979. He was considered an extremely diligent and respected parliamentarian in the constituency and in the House. I am certain that he will continue to contribute to public life in some way. He is an Aberdeen man and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen, South said, in the true tradition of Aberdeen people, he will be back at some time in the future.

For me, the past two months have been incredibly hard work and something of a whirlwind; I was selected on 1 April and elected on 1 May. That success was due entirely to the hard work of my family and colleagues in the constituency and, of course, the Labour party manifesto on which I stood. It included a commitment to the Scottish Constitutional Convention scheme for a Scottish Parliament. It is a well-thought-out and carefully constructed scheme.

When Norman Hogg was elected in 1979, I was the chair of the East Dunbartonshire constituency party of which Cumbernauld was a part. My hon. Friend, the newly elected Member for Stirling (Mrs. McGuire), was the election agent when we won what was then the most marginal constituency in Britain—a three-way marginal. It is a great delight that my hon. Friend and I have been elected together to make up the 101 Labour women Members of Parliament.

The House might be interested in an experience we had on our first day in London. With my hon. Friend the new Member for Ayr (Mrs. Osborne), we hailed a taxi and asked a London cabbie to take us to the House of Commons Members' entrance. Once we were settled, he said, "You the wives of MPs then?" That was the first lesson for that London cabbie and I think that there might be a few more lessons to be learnt, not only by everyone in the House, but in London.

The sitting Member who was defeated in 1979 by Norman Hogg was none other than the current hon. Member for Moray (Mrs. Ewing), who as Margaret Bain had won the seat with the slimmest of majorities—22, if I recall. She won it from the former Conservative Member, Mr. Barry Henderson. It was an incredibly hotly contested election. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Moray and Mr. Henderson, who were excellent former Members for the constituency. Of course, part of the constituency, Kilsyth and the surrounding areas, was ably represented by my hon. Friend the Member for Falkirk, West (Mr. Canavan). The redrawing of the boundaries meant that the constituency of Cumbernauld and Kilsyth was created. It has been as it is now since 1984 and the people have had the good sense to return consistently a Labour Member of Parliament.

The constituency is at a very vulnerable stage in its development. Cumbernauld is one of Scotland's highly successful new towns—some would argue it is the best. It is vital to Scotland's economy because of its ability to attract quality inward investors, who provide quality jobs not only for the people of Cumbernauld and Kilsyth and villagers of Banton, Croy and Queenzieburn, but for many others in the surrounding communities.

The development corporation, on which I had the honour to represent the people of the town for about 12 years, has been wound up—in fact, my term of office terminated the day before I was selected as candidate for the constituency—which means that we can no longer enjoy special development status. I think that it is appropriate that, after 40 years, Cumbernauld is no longer considered a new town.

The change came at the same time as the previous Government's botched reorganisation of local government. As a result, we were gerrymandered into Lanarkshire and not Dunbartonshire, our natural home. Hon. Members will recall that that was done solely in an attempt to create a Tory council in East Dunbartonshire. We all know that that try failed miserably, since there is not one Tory council in Scotland—a forerunner for the results on 1 May. It is quite clear, however, from the attitude of some Conservative Members that they have still not learnt any lessons from the people of Scotland.

The people in my constituency are rightly concerned that we should continue the momentum of development, particularly in terms of high-quality employment, the quality of shopping provision and commercial development in the Cumbernauld and Kilsyth areas. I assure them that I will work tirelessly to meet their high expectations. I am certain that the Government's proposals will contribute significantly.

A decision will be taken shortly on the route of the M80, the final link in the motorway network of central Scotland, which will join the M9 and the M876 to the north and the M73 and the M80 to the south. I made it clear throughout the election campaign that I believed that it would be of tremendous economic importance to the entire area if a bypass that achieved several aims, including retaining the existing road as a relief route in the event of an incident, was built—in effect, two roads for the price of one. The upgrading of the existing road would leave Cumbernauld, with a population of 50,000, as the only town between Glasgow and the far north of Scotland without a bypass. I will continue to have discussions with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland and the Under-Secretary with responsibility for transport about that.

Many hon. Members have referred to the sporting achievements of their constituencies, particularly those of their football teams. My constituency has a superb record both at national and international level in many sports, including swimming, wrestling, gymnastics and the special Olympics to name but a few. The football team, Clyde, has still to gain some honours. Since it came to Cumbernauld it has made slow progress—some might say very slow progress.

The Bill marks a milestone in the renewal of democracy in Britain. We have become the most centralised state in Europe. Politics have been discredited and politicians are regarded sceptically by our young people. Our young people voted for the Government, however, because we

offered them hope for the future not only about jobs, but through our promise to change the way in which the country is governed. We promised to return the decision-making process to the people, to involve them in the debate about the future direction of the country and to clean up politics.

Over the past few years, I have spoken frequently to groups of young people in my role as president of the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities. The one thing that really caught their interest was when I spoke about the proposals for a Scottish Parliament, particularly the form and nature of that Parliament: elected by a form of proportional representation, inclusive, consultative and with the commitment of the Scottish Labour party and the Scottish Liberal Democrats to field candidates on the basis of 50 per cent. women and 50 per cent. men. That is an important part of the proposals and one that we must never forget.

Young people are put off by the yah-boo behaviour that we often witness in the House—particularly the other night from Opposition Members—but they are excited by the prospect of having a decision-making body that takes on board the views of the many. They are interested in new politics, and the referendums will begin to show them what that really means.

Like many other hon. Members, I have been a member of the Scottish Constitutional Convention since the beginning and have sat on the executive all that time, representing Scottish local government. I am convinced that the Scottish people want a Parliament. They certainly voted massively for parties offering them a devolved Parliament, so I have no fears of asking them to endorse that view by referendum, which I am certain they will.

I say to the people who say that we should have the independence option on the ballot paper that the time to vote for independence was on 1 May, when the people returned only six hon. Members with independence as their option, clearly rejecting that view. To the people who say that we do not need a referendum, I say, "Why not?" A yes, yes vote will give the Scotland Bill the democratic legitimacy to ensure its safe passage through both Houses of Parliament, which should not ignore the will of the people. This is about constitutional change and the people have the right to express their views. I believe that there will be a substantial yes, yes vote.

I thank the House for listening with courtesy to my contribution and I hope to be involved in many debates in future.

6.1 pm

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): I am sure that I speak for the whole House when I congratulate the hon. Member for Cumbernauld and Kilsyth (Ms McKenna) on her admirable maiden speech. The House probably heard more of the charm and the taxi driver more of the tenacity, but we have enjoyed listening to her and I am sure that she will make many other fine speeches. May I add that it was also a great privilege to be present to hear the speech of the hon. Member for Aberdeen, South (Miss Begg)?

The hon. Member for Cumbernauld and Kilsyth paid a particularly gracious and well-deserved tribute to her predecessor, Norman Hogg, a much respected former Member of the House. He was particularly appreciated for the firm impartiality that he displayed in the Chair.

[*Sir Patrick Cormack*]

He was one of the most senior members of the Chairmen's Panel and, in that role, had to preside over a number of Bills with which he did not, I am sure, entirely agree, but his impartiality was never in doubt and he will be much missed here. I hope that the hon. Lady will not take that amiss.

It is important that Conservative Members take careful stock of what happened on 1 May. We have to recognise that, for the time being at least—I am convinced that it is only for the time being—we are an English rural and suburban party, in the main. There is, therefore, no point in spitting in the wind or in pretending that what has happened has not happened. We have to approach the Bill and the legislation that will follow with realism as well as determination.

I do not begrudge the Labour party its sense of euphoria at its victory. That is entirely natural. We felt something of that in 1983 when we had a very large majority, but the seeds of our downfall were sown in that very large majority. The man who made the most sensible comments, Lord Pym, then Francis Pym, was promptly sacked for his pains. He warned of the dangers of arrogance. I hope that the Labour party, when it has got over its sense of euphoria, will not lapse into arrogance, because that will damage not only the Labour party, but this Parliament.

I approach this Bill in, I hope, a spirit of realism, but as one who believes passionately in the United Kingdom. I have certain Scottish credentials. My family is Scottish in origin, and my wife is an Aberdonian. At the general election, my son had the great privilege of contesting the seat held by the hon. Member for West Renfrewshire (Mr. Graham). No young politician could have had a more gracious opponent than him, and I thank him for the courtesy that he showed my son during the election.

Dr. Norman A. Godman (Greenock and Inverclyde): I met the hon. Gentleman's son on a couple of occasions and I found him to be pleasant company. Will the hon. Gentleman confirm that his son has expressed a desire to stand for the Scottish Parliament on behalf of the Scottish Conservative party?

Sir Patrick Cormack: It is a very unwise father who seeks to determine his son's career; all I would say to the hon. Gentleman is that my son is a realist, as I am. He believes, as I do, that there will be a Scottish Parliament and it would be entirely understandable if he aspired to be a Member of it. If that were his ambition, he would have my total support.

As I say, I accept that there will be a Scottish Parliament, but I am a passionate believer in the United Kingdom and I beg the Under-Secretary of State for Scotland and all his ministerial colleagues to think carefully about the point that I raised in my intervention during the speech of the Secretary of State for Scotland. It is all very well saying that only 22 per cent. of people voted for independence on 1 May. In a general election, there are a range of reasons why people cast their votes, and we all know that. The overriding case for any referendum is that there is a specific question before people and they vote on it. I agree strongly with the hon. Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell), whom I am

privileged to call a friend, that it would be far more sensible to have this referendum after legislation, but I fear that we are not going to have that option and that is why I make the points that I do.

We should give the people the opportunity to demonstrate their affirmation of the United Kingdom. I believe that at least 78 per cent. would do that, but I do not know. No hon. Member knows. If Scotland voted by a majority to be independent, of course it would become independent. That would be disastrous not just for the United Kingdom, but for Scotland. The United Kingdom is much greater than the sum of its parts. I was here and opposed the devolution legislation in the 1970s, and I have always opposed such legislation. Were the parties more evenly balanced now, I would be taking a different line because I would think that we could overturn the Bill. I know that we cannot in this Parliament. I have to be a realist, so I want to try to ensure that the Scottish Parliament does not lead to the break-up of the United Kingdom.

I take my example from a wise old Conservative whom I got to know when I first came into the House, the late Sir Derek Walker-Smith, who became Lord Broxbourne. He fought with passionate intensity the legislation that took Britain into what was then the Common Market, but the moment the decision was taken, he became one of the first Members of the delegated European Parliament. He said that he was going to try to prevent what he had forecast coming to pass. He made a significant contribution as chairman of one of the legislative Committees of that Parliament and was entirely positive in his approach. I would like to emulate that approach now. If we are to ensure that the Parliament does not become a fragmentary influence and lead to the break-up of the United Kingdom, we shall have a much better chance of success if in the referendum there has been a conclusive affirmation of belief in the United Kingdom by the people of Scotland.

I therefore beg Ministers to think carefully about the inclusion of a third question. I know that I would have the support of the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Mr. Salmond), but for different reasons. He would be campaigning vigorously to try to increase the independence vote—that is an entirely fair and proper thing to do in a democratic debate—while we would be campaigning with vigour and, I hope, clarity to demonstrate the true advantages of the United Kingdom.

I must not stray into the subject of last Friday's debate. We are dealing now with a specific issue and a specific Bill. Sadly, I could not take part in Friday's debate because I was at the funeral of our late colleague, Michael Shersby. Had I taken part in it, I would have developed my arguments in detail.

Suffice it to say that I implore Ministers and all supporters of the Government to think again about the adamant refusal to include a third question. Let us face the reality; let the Scottish people make their decision and show how strongly they believe in the United Kingdom. If they do that with an affirmative answer to that question, which I believe should probably be the first question but which, with equal logic, could be the third, I do not believe that the establishment of a Scottish Parliament need necessarily lead to what many of us previously forecast. I should then be happier if a member of my family became a Member of it.

6.11 pm

Mr. Martin O'Neill (Ochil): I congratulate my hon. Friends the Members for Aberdeen, South (Miss Begg) and for Cumbernauld and Kilsyth (Ms McKenna) on excellent maiden speeches. The fact that they have both been schoolteachers is a testament to the ability of teachers to make themselves heard. Certainly, the ability to project one's voice to the back of the room will be a great advantage. I look forward to hearing them bring to other debates experience which, as they said, was of no small assistance to them in describing the problems of their constituencies and the challenges that lie ahead.

I should particularly like to record our respect and support for my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen, South. The nature of the difficulties of adjusting to this place will be greater for her, but it is important that she, like the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Brightside (Mr. Blunkett), will be blazing a trail for people with disabilities and those who have been denied access to too many opportunities. By coming here and making a clear statement about the inclusive character of this Parliament, she will help all those concerned with people who have disabilities. Her speech and her positive approach are examples to us all.

I also congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, Anniesland (Mr. Dewar) on his appointment as Secretary of State for Scotland. His long acquaintance and association with the cause of devolution is of great assistance in hammering home this case. It is clear that, no matter what the Government do, they will be accused of backsliding on devolution. One could say that we should have passed the Bill before Whit, that we could have delayed the Whit recess and spent the week here. Perhaps then the scribblers at *The Scotsman*, or at least the scribblers in its letters column, would have been silenced.

The Bill is, however, the first legislative proposal since the general election, which shows the high priority given to what I hope will be a long-term programme of decentralisation in the United Kingdom. It certainly gives the lie to the notion that, without a large separatist vote, there would be no guarantee that the legislation would be brought forward.

There was not a large separatist vote. I use the word "separatist", because I do not think it is right for any particular party to claim ownership or copyright of the word "nationalist". When we are dealing with legislation of this character, we draw a distinction between devolution and separatism. For the purpose of today's debate at least, I shall refer to such people as separatists or secessionists.

The Labour party had a difficult time last summer at the time of the initial decision—or perhaps we should say "instruction"—to have a referendum. I remember many of my colleagues being extremely concerned about it. I felt that there was a case for a pre-legislative referendum. I remember discussing it with Bruce Millan, the former Secretary of State, after the 1979 general election. He felt that the obstructionism and so many of the difficulties placed in the way of the devolution proposals at that time could have been avoided had there been a clear expression by the Scottish people during the early stages.

It is disingenuous of people to say that they do not know what the proposals are. Frankly, the proposals have been around for a long time. I happen to believe that the

work of the Scottish Constitutional Convention has brought the proposals to the Scottish people, who are now being given the chance to pass judgment on them as much as on anything else. When people read the White Paper, they will see that it closely shadows the convention's proposals. My first point, therefore, is that a pre-legislative referendum will assist our handling of the matter.

Secondly, let us consider the question of the Parliament's tax-varying powers. We were told by the former right hon. Member for Stirling that the Scottish people considered tax-raising powers an anathema. When the Secretary of State of the day raises a question of that character with the rigour and force that he did, it is only reasonable that, if we are to have a referendum, we say that the two questions—the principle of the establishment of a Parliament and the question of its tax-varying powers—should be considered together.

If any part of this country is to be governed by a different set of arrangements, it is only reasonable that the people who are to be most directly affected should have the opportunity to speak and be consulted. Before the constitutional changes are made, it is advisable that, after due debate, the people should be allowed the final say on the principle.

That is now becoming the consensus when we consider matters relating to what might come out of the intergovernmental conference and developments in the European Union. It will certainly reinforce the hand of the legislators if support for a Parliament is substantial. It has to be said that it will give some power to the elbow of those who oppose it if the majority is small. Nevertheless, the principle is that, before constitutional change is effected, the people should have the right of veto.

The hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Sir P. Cormack) spent some time on the issue of a third question, on the establishment of a separate Scottish state. There seem to be two sets of arguments in favour of that proposal. The first is that, because the subject under consideration is a Scottish Government, all options should be offered to the people. Such an argument is usually made by separatists, and it is an understandable ploy.

Separatists know that, if they are to separate from the United Kingdom, they will first have to secure a majority of Scottish seats in the House. Although only time will tell, I should think that it would be easier to secure a majority of the Scottish seats than it would be to win a majority of Scottish votes. The United Kingdom does not have proportional representation, and constitutional change will occur if a majority of hon. Members is in favour of it. After such a majority, as I said, it would be desirable to hold a referendum.

If we included a third question in the referendum, however, we would be giving the nationalists what they want, without their having to secure the necessary electoral support in a general election. Therefore, I do not think that anything would be achieved by allowing separatists to include such a question, because—as the hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr. Wallace) said—ultimately that third question was the only distinctive offer that they made to the Scottish people.

At the general election, the only difference between the agendas, manifestos and wish lists of the separatists and those of the other Scottish parties was their promise that,

[Mr. Martin O'Neill]

if they won a majority of parliamentary seats, they would hold a referendum to determine whether a majority is in favour of Scotland separating from the United Kingdom.

I do not believe that we should hold a referendum only to show the weakness of the nationalists' case—after which, presumably, they will go away. Those who want a separate Scottish state will be in the House as long as there are politics in the United Kingdom, and it is nonsense to think that they would be obliterated by a referendum. There will always be a place in Scottish politics for the greeting tendency and a last home for the disaffected and alienated, and they will probably find that home within the ranks of the separatist party.

We should realise that the separatists' fortunes will rise and fall. Labour Members should ensure that the proposals for a tax-varying Scottish Parliament are coherently presented to the people in the September 1997 referendum.

My hon. Friend the Minister for Home Affairs and Devolution is on the Treasury Bench. He may wish to investigate a statement that votes will be counted on the Scottish local government level. The last time that votes were counted on a local authority level—the example that was provided—was by using the upper-tier authorities. There are now, however, about 50 authorities. Would it not be simpler to count votes on the basis of Scottish parliamentary constituencies, which is the usual system for ballots of national significance?

We are debating a great constitutional experiment, which has an element of risk. Labour Members are, however, confident that we will win. Nevertheless, some—such as my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell)—will, as ever, work quietly and effectively to try to secure a “no” vote in the referendum. There may be some risk, but there is risk in any great political experiment. I think that we will be successful in securing two “yes” responses to the questions.

Although I may be wrong, I think that establishing a Parliament in Scotland is more certain than establishing an Assembly in Wales. The decentralisation debate in Wales seems to be much less advanced than it is in Scotland.

Mr. Dalyell: For reasons that I gave in Friday's debate, I make it clear that my personal vote on the second question would be yes.

Mr. O'Neill: Yes; and I think that my hon. Friend would not be wildly enthusiastic about the first question. Given his ability to campaign and to make his political presence felt, despite the loneliness of the cause that he might be pursuing, I suspect that we may cross swords, as we have done on other issues. Nevertheless, I do not think that that will affect our friendship, which has lasted the best part of 30 years.

The establishment of a Scottish Parliament will strengthen the Union, and show that it is possible to change our constitutional arrangements. It will also show other parts of the United Kingdom that it is possible to institute some form of decentralisation, and that decentralisation will not necessarily take the same form in every part of the United Kingdom.

The decentralisation process will demonstrate that some decentralisation will be available to the nations and regions of the United Kingdom, and it will create a dynamism that will establish a more credible democracy and a more accountable system of government and administration. It is very exciting that, in the early days of the new Government, we have an opportunity to speed that process on its way.

6.25 pm

Mr. Andrew Lansley (South Cambridgeshire): Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to make my maiden speech. It is a daunting prospect, not least because I follow the exemplary and entertaining speeches of the hon. Members for Aberdeen, South (Miss Begg) and for Cumbernauld and Kilsyth (Ms McKenna).

I am more than happy to pay the warmest tribute to my predecessor, Sir Anthony Grant, who was the hon. Member for South-West Cambridgeshire. Hon. Members will be aware of his distinguished 33-year record of service to the House, where he served as both a Front Bencher and a Back Bencher. He piloted through the House private Member's legislation, such as—most recently, in the 1996-97 Session—the Treasure Act 1996.

Today—which is the day of elections to the 1922 Committee executive—is an apt moment for Conservative Members to recall with affection Sir Anthony's wit, wisdom and many years of service on that executive. The House will not be surprised to hear that he was held in equally high regard and affection within his constituency, because of the prompt, courteous and effective way in which he dealt with constituents of all political views.

As one of my predecessors said, Cambridgeshire is “a county of villages”. South Cambridgeshire is a most beautiful part of a most beautiful county. The southern part of Cambridge city and the countryside around it, which I have the honour to represent, combines natural beauty with economic and intellectual dynamism. It is a working countryside with a thriving agricultural sector, yet many new and innovative companies and industrial firms are finding a home there. It is overwhelmingly a small business economy, which is why, in the past five years, unemployment in South Cambridgeshire has been halved.

The proximity of Cambridge—as a centre for employment, based on scientific and technological advances—combines with a relatively unspoilt character to make South Cambridgeshire a magnet for new development. It is therefore no wonder that South Cambridgeshire is the fastest growing district in England, especially when one considers the opportunities of living in such beautiful villages as Grantchester, Orwell, Duxford and Dry Drayton. I could continue that list—perhaps I should, because other villages may be jealous—but I will spare the House a list of the many beautiful villages in South Cambridgeshire. They occupy, however, a position both geographically and economically advantageous.

I look forward to participating in many debates in the House, and I will do so on the basis of experiences from within a constituency that, in its understanding and its experience, has so much to offer.

In science, we have at Hinxton the human genome project which will lead to the largest genetic sequencing laboratory in Europe—indeed the world. In health,

in Addenbrooke's and Papworth hospitals we have two of the leading hospitals in the world. In agriculture, we have the plant breeding institute, which is the source of the well-known Maris plant varieties. In education, we have not only the colleges of Cambridge university, but two of the leading further education colleges.

It is a great honour to represent a constituency in which is blended the best of what is new—in science, in industry, in health and in education—with the best of our inheritance in environment and in history. Cambridgeshire, as Rupert Brooke wrote, is

"the shire for Men who Understand"—

and, I should add promptly, for women too.

I speak in this debate only too aware of the inheritance given to us in our United Kingdom. Most of us are, in a personal sense as well as in a constitutional and historical sense, products of the Union. For nearly three centuries, this House has been the representative institution of the people of Scotland just as much as of the people of England. We are intermingled, in history and in nationality. I am the grandson of Scots as well as of English. My inheritance is bound up with the Union, and I have every right to defend it.

It is ironic that the Government's first legislative initiative is to introduce proposals that, essentially, are those on which their predecessors founded in 1979. I submit that the Bill is flawed, for several reasons. The House is being asked to approve or disapprove a popular vote on a major constitutional change before it has been given an opportunity to see the character of the proposals in detail.

The details within the proposals are likely to be deeply significant. Which powers are proposed to be transferred, and with what expenditure and tax revenues? What are the implications of two fiscal regimes within one economy, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory) asked? What would be the mechanisms for resolving conflicts between the Westminster Parliament and a Scottish Parliament or Welsh Assembly?

We do not know in detail the character of the proposals; nor do we know whether those issues will be fully clarified before a referendum is held. Unfortunately, it would be only too characteristic of the Labour party to wish to proceed on the basis of generalities, without regard to all the practical issues.

I contend that it would also be wrong to proceed to a referendum on the basis of a White Paper alone. White Papers are proposals, but they are subject to many changes. I have had experience of writing White Papers, and I would never have been so rash as to assume that they would represent the last word, still less to seek to subject them to a popular vote before they had even been fully debated in the House.

That point brings me to a flaw that goes to the heart of the Bill. The purpose of the Bill is to seek to legitimise the Government's proposals in advance of their presentation to the House. Such a referendum is a constitutional aberration. As Mrs. Thatcher said, nothing should be permitted under our constitution which conflicts with the principle of the sovereignty of Parliament. I suspect, however, that the Government will argue that a referendum would be a mandate for legislation. That is wholly wrong. If the Government wish to legitimise

constitutional change through a referendum—and there is a perfectly good case for doing so—it should be post-legislative, and not prior to legislation.

In 1975, the previous Labour Government undertook a referendum. The then Leader of the House admitted that the purpose of the referendum was to determine the policy of the Government, as

"Parliament, of course, cannot be bound by it."—[*Official Report*, 11 March 1975; Vol. 888, c. 293.]

Is this proposed referendum, therefore, equally nothing but a device to decide Government policy? On the issue of a tax-varying power, perhaps it is, but the Government pretend otherwise, as they insist that all their Members must campaign for a "yes" vote. Ominously, the Secretary of State for Scotland is already talking of a final decision by the people, before the Bill has gone through the House. It is an unconstitutional pretence that a final decision can be made on an issue of such constitutional importance before the devolution proposals have even been presented to the House, let alone have passed into legislation.

The flaws in the Bill are many, given that it is a Bill of relative simplicity. Its simplicity belies its significance or the impact of its failings.

The Bill fails to offer a vote to the people of England on an issue of great constitutional importance for the continuation and structure of the Union. It fails to provide for a vote for the many Scots and Welsh who have a legitimate interest in the future of their countries and of the Union, but who live in England and are not resident in Scotland or Wales. It provides no safeguard to ensure that the vote in the referendum would represent a sufficient majority of those eligible to vote. The Secretary of State for Scotland appealed on one occasion earlier in the debate to the precedent of 1979—unwisely from his point of view, I suspect, as that precedent would act against him.

We are therefore left with the proposition that a minority of the potential electorate in only two out of four parts of the Union may be invited to decide the future of the Union, without regard to the people of England or to the many Scots and Welsh people living in England. That would be deeply resented by those so excluded.

The people of South Cambridgeshire will not be indifferent to an outcome in which they are to be ruled by laws made by Scots and Welsh representatives, while their own representatives have no say over the same laws in Scotland and Wales. They will resent the introduction of a referendum as an apparent attempt to bind Parliament, and as a device that should be alien to our constitution.

We have heard much from Labour Members of their mandate. I fear that we shall hear them stretch the issue of a mandate beyond breaking point as a concept. They have already applied it to decisions going beyond the terms of their manifesto. They will no doubt apply it to their devolution proposals, on which so many questions were and are still to be resolved.

I, too, come to this House with a mandate. I am pledged to oppose the breaking up of the United Kingdom. I am pledged to defend the sovereignty of Parliament, and not see it surrendered or undermined. Most of all, I am pledged to serve the interests of my constituency to the best of my ability and judgment. It is a privilege to represent South Cambridgeshire in this House and to follow Sir Anthony Grant, whose example has always

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been one of service and dignity. In defence of our constitution, therefore, I urge the House to support the amendment in the names of my right hon. Friends.

6.37 pm

Mr. Ted Rowlands (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney): It is a privilege to follow and to congratulate the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley), who was making his maiden speech. It was also a privilege to listen to his very reasoned argument. If he makes such reasoned arguments in future, the House will, I am sure, listen to him with great diligence. I knew his predecessor quite well. I shared almost 30 of the 33 years he spent in the House, so I understand and appreciate the compliments his successor paid him. I offer the hon. Gentleman best wishes.

My hon. Friends the Members for Cumbernauld and Kilsyth (Ms McKenna) and for Aberdeen, South (Miss Begg) made wonderful maiden speeches. I am glad that the electorate of Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney do not have the habits of the electorate of Aberdeen, South. I am only the fourth Member to represent Merthyr Tydfil since 1900, and only the third to represent Rhymney since 1929. We have a sense of political longevity, so it has been hard to present myself as new Labour.

It was even harder when, during the election of the Speaker, I sat next to a new Member of Parliament, my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon, Central (Mr. Davies), who rather unkindly reminded me that the last time we met was when I presented him with his investiture mug in 1968 at Birchgrove junior school in Cardiff. It made me feel that I would have some difficulty presenting myself as new Labour.

Listening to the speeches and the many references to constituencies prompted me to think about those who have represented my constituency. Of the four representatives for Merthyr whom I mentioned, two—Kier Hardie and S. O. Davies—were strong supporters of some form of home rule. My predecessors in Rhymney offer an interesting diversity. The first was Aneurin Bevan—the scourge of any form of devolution or any suggestion that anything but the United Kingdom Parliament mattered. He was followed by Michael Foot, who was a passionate supporter of devolution.

We all share a feeling of the importance and power of this House of Commons. I would not support measures that damaged the integrity of the United Kingdom. I am not a separatist, and I shall not vote for anything that looks like separatism. The separatist vote in my constituency was minimal at the election. I do not come to the House to support any proposal that could lead to the break-up of the integrity of the United Kingdom or the United Kingdom Parliament.

I very much support the referendum. It is odd—we have to admit this among ourselves—that the Labour party, when in opposition, arrived at the decision to have a referendum in such a convoluted way, but a referendum is desirable and essential for Wales.

It has been fashionable in some quarters in Wales to deride the proposed Assembly as a feeble institution. It is certainly not true that, because it will not have tax-raising and legislative powers, it will not be an important constitutional change. It is a change of enormous

significance, and we would be foolish to pretend otherwise. A proposal that will transform the character of the civil service in Wales cannot be seen as a minor constitutional step. It is a serious step.

I had the privilege of serving as a Minister in the Welsh Office. The civil service that has developed since the establishment of the Welsh Office and the appointment of a Secretary of State for Wales in 1964 was designed to serve Westminster, Whitehall and Cabinet government. The new proposals are that the Welsh civil service will serve a different body, with the open system of decision making that I assume will characterise the Welsh Assembly. That is an area of profound change and significance.

Mr. Dalyell: My hon. Friend has raised an important point. He has great experience of the civil service. What is his judgment about the civil service having two masters—in our case, one in Edinburgh and one in London?

Mr. Rowlands: It will be very important to make it absolutely clear in the detailed legislation where responsibilities lie and who will be responsible to whom. If not, the system will fail. As a veteran of the 1970s legislation, I assure my hon. Friend that—if I understand the speech made on Friday by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales—it will be clear that the Welsh Office civil service will be answerable directly to a Welsh Assembly. That will be a profound change. It is not a minor administrative decision. We must be frank that, if we set up a directly elected Assembly in Wales, there will be competition between Westminster Members and Assembly men and women. It would be very strange if that did not happen.

The change is not one of minor practicalities, even leaving aside the question of the roles of the Secretary of State and of Westminster Members of Parliament. It is important to clarify whether the questions that we are now entitled to debate will be disallowed in this House as infringing the responsibilities and powers of the Welsh Assembly if certain functions are transferred.

I use those illustrations to show that the establishment of a Welsh Assembly is not a minor step. It is not a modest step forward—it is a change of considerable constitutional and political significance, which requires the consent of the Welsh people.

The second reason why I believe in a referendum is that, until now, that consent has been withheld—and not just in the 1979 referendum. One interesting feature emerges when we make a historical assessment of the debates in the 1950s and 1960s, as I have done. A gulf grew up between what are now called the chattering classes—I belong to those chattering classes, but I think that that pejorative description is a good one—who have promoted the case for a Welsh Assembly for 30 or 40 years and the large silent majority, who have shown considerable scepticism about the issue. We would be foolish to forget that gulf.

I was a member of the Welsh parliamentary Labour party in the 1960s and was among those arguing for a Welsh Parliament or Assembly—an elected body of some kind for all Wales. I was slightly contemptuous of those whom we saw as the old guard—Iori Thomas, Elfed Davies and the Monmouthshire mining Members—who

bitterly opposed the commitment of the Labour party in Wales to any form of devolution. I have to confess, on reflection, that they were in closer touch with grass-roots party opinion, and probably with Welsh public opinion, than the likes of me. It is salutary for us to remember that. The consent of the Welsh electorate is all the more necessary, making the case for a referendum even stronger.

I share some of the reservations expressed about the process that we have adopted. I hope that this is not a nit-picking parliamentary point, but I am a passionate believer in this place—that is why I have spent so much time fighting to get here and stay here—and I find it strange to bring forward a Bill with a reference in the schedules to Government proposals that we have not seen. There is no White Paper. Before all the stages of the Bill are completed, we must have that White Paper. In parliamentary terms, it would be better for us to have the detailed proposals alongside the Bill.

I have supported two referendums in my parliamentary lifetime. The Referendum Act 1975 was explicit, referring specifically to proposals already laid before the House in the White Paper and the renegotiated settlement on the European Community. In 1979, an Act of Parliament was submitted to the electorate, so it was again clear what we were deciding to have a referendum on. I understand that, for a variety of reasons, my right hon. and hon. Friends have chosen a different process, but before all the stages of the Bill are completed, we should see the White Paper.

I shall not oppose the Bill, but I find it necessary to set out my reservations. By choosing pre-referendum rather than post-referendum legislation, we may create difficulties for some of our colleagues. As the Bill will allow counting, and presumably totals, on a county or borough basis, some hon. Members representing Wales and possibly Scotland may find that the verdict of their electorate is contrary to their personal view. They are interesting dilemmas, but they may create problems, as some of our colleagues may support the legislation in the House and then find that their constituents are not so keen on it.

Mr. Salmond: That is an interesting scenario. Of course, it could apply to the hon. Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell). As the hon. Gentleman is a very experienced Member, how would he expect his hon. Friend to move under these circumstances?

Mr. Rowlands: My knowledge of my hon. Friend is so considerable that I would not attempt to speak for him. I am sure that he will explain his position clearly.

Mr. Dalyell: The House will forgive me if I display a little curiosity as to how my constituent, the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Mr. Salmond), the leader of the Scottish National party, will vote.

Mr. Rowlands: I am sure that all will be revealed.

Having chosen the order in which the process is to be conducted, some hon. Members will face a dilemma of Burkean proportions in their approach to the legislation.

I support the Bill, because I support the referendum. I am one of that small, dwindling, enthusiastic band who voted for the devolution proposals in the House in 1978 and voted in the subsequent referendum. It was a painful

process for me, as someone who has now achieved 77 per cent. of the vote in Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney, to find myself so overwhelmingly in a minority in 1978.

I would support devolution proposals for Wales of the kind that were introduced in the 1978 Bill. However, I await the Government's detailed proposals with great fascination and interest. Clearly, in some respects they will be different from those introduced in 1978. I shall exercise the same right to say yes or no as, I am glad to say, the House will give my constituents.

6.52 pm

Mr. Alex Salmond (Banff and Buchan): The hon. Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Mr. Rowlands) mentioned Keir Hardie. It was Keir Hardie who said in 1885 that a Scottish Parliament was "just round the corner". It has been some time coming, but we hope that progress is on its way.

We have heard some good and interesting maiden speeches this evening, to which I shall briefly refer. The hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley) made a most effective maiden speech. Although he is new to the House, he is clearly not new to the political process. Indeed, he said that he had written some White Papers. I had an overwhelming temptation to ask him which ones. That would have been totally out of order, as the hon. Gentleman well knows, but I am sure that we can look forward to hearing many more speeches from him in the course of our proceedings.

I do not know South Cambridgeshire nearly as well as the hon. Gentleman does, but he will forgive me if I am tempted to say that I am not absolutely certain that the pikes will come out of the thatch in Cambridgeshire to resist these constitutional proposals. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman will prove me wrong.

The hon. Member for Cumbernauld and Kilsyth (Ms McKenna) made an equally effective speech. She comes to the House with a formidable reputation in Scottish local government, but nowhere in her curriculum vitae did she say that she did impressions of London taxi drivers. She revealed an entirely new facet of her character this evening.

The hon. Lady made a most gracious maiden speech. I am sure that she will argue with as much determination for increased funding for Scottish local government inside the House as she did outside it. She paid a well-meant tribute to her immediate predecessor, Norman Hogg, a man with whom I disagreed on just about everything except that we should conduct our differences with good humour. She also referred to my hon. Friend the Member for Moray (Mrs. Ewing). If the hon. Lady conducts herself in the House in the same way as the two hon. Members to whom she referred, she will add a great deal to our proceedings.

We also heard a remarkable maiden speech from the hon. Member for Aberdeen, South (Miss Begg). Maiden speeches that combine humour, constituency knowledge and a touch of controversy are by far the best, and the hon. Lady's speech did just that. She said that Aberdeen, her native city, had won Britain in Bloom as many times as Ireland had won the Eurovision song contest. She also displayed a great knowledge of her constituency.

The hon. Lady referred to her very many predecessors in controversial and humorous terms. She said that the Secretary of State for Scotland was responsible for

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starting the instability in Aberdeen, South, and perhaps more, who knows? She mentioned Iain Sproat. During the previous Parliament, Iain and I were told by a genealogist in the south-west of Scotland that we were remote relatives. I do not know which of us was more alarmed—however, he was one of the more effective Ministers in the previous Government.

The hon. Lady also mentioned Gerry Malone. The hon. Member for Inverness, East, Nairn and Lochaber (Mr. Stewart) will be interested to know that a couple of days ago, a senior Conservative told me that a friend of his and his wife had been anxiously pondering over whether to vote for Gerry Malone in his constituency or against the Scottish National party in Inverness. They finally decided to cast their votes against the Scottish National party and not to vote for Gerry Malone, who lost by two votes.

The hon. Lady also said that Raymond Robertson was extremely polite to her in defeat. The fact that she mentioned politeness and Raymond Robertson together is a great testimony to her diplomacy, and I am sure that she will bring that characteristic to our debates. She made a splendid and remarkable maiden speech and we all look forward to hearing many more such contributions.

The Secretary of State for Scotland made a graceful opening speech. I was particularly impressed by the way in which he repelled the last-ditchers in the Conservative party one by one and helped them dig themselves in deeper as they intervened.

I should mention that after a forceful start, there are now only four Members on the Conservative Benches defending the essential unity of the United Kingdom. I understand that considerably more of them are voting for the new 1922 Committee. That demonstrates that internal warfare is now more important to the Conservative party than the future of the United Kingdom.

None the less, the Secretary of State for Scotland was extremely deft in the way in which he repelled Conservative Members' attacks. He made the point that he had a record on devolution stretching back to the 1950s. Some of his ministerial team have track records stretching back to the 1970s—on the other side. We shall see how that is played out during the passage of the Bill.

I was rather alarmed by the Secretary of State's revelation that the Bill gives 123 Scottish peers the right to vote in a referendum. I had not noticed that aspect. It could be interpreted as a rather underhand attempt to get the support of the former leader of the Liberal Democrat party, who is soon to be ennobled and no doubt is anxious to have his say in the referendum vote.

The Conservatives' response to the legislation showed that they had learnt very little from the election campaign. Indeed, the speeches seemed to pick up very little—even from the recent Scottish debate. They were very much a statement of the positions that we have heard for far too long in the House and elsewhere.

I was somewhat relieved that at least the shadow Home Secretary, the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard), did not go down the road of the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague), who I see is back on the Front Bench. I say to the right hon. Gentleman that the argument for a special

blocking mechanism, a threshold, a 40 per cent. rule, or a 50 per cent. rule, as the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) has suggested, is one of the most offensive arguments and anti-democratic notions that could disgrace the House. To argue that for Scotland and Wales while simultaneously not being prepared to say that it would apply to a referendum on Europe is most insulting behaviour to the people of Scotland and Wales, and in large measure explains the Conservative party's reduced position in both those nations.

Mr. Rhodri Morgan: It has not reduced, it has disappeared.

Mr. Salmond: I was being polite. This is my latest phase, as hon. Members will recognise. I shall move out of that phase to turn to what I think about the Bill.

There is an inconsistency at the very heart of the Referendums (Scotland and Wales) Bill. Two legitimate positions can be adopted in looking for consent from the people. The first is to say that the general election provides the mandate and thereby the authority for the Government to proceed with their programme—or, indeed, for a political party to proceed with its ideas.

If the new Labour party had taken such a course and said that it had won a considerable victory and therefore had the majority to go forward with its legislative programme, I do not think that anyone could reasonably have gainsaid that as a substantial mandate for applying its ideas on the constitution. At a later stage, depending on the judgment, degree of controversy and the number of changes made to the proposed legislation, it might be appropriate to subject that mandate to a post-legislative referendum, as in the 1970s. That is one way of addressing legitimacy, mandates and consent, and it is consistent.

The second position is to say that the general election did not produce a mandate on the proposals, there is some uncertainty, many other issues clouded the general election environment and the issue was not finally settled. That is the course to be taken by the Government, as explained by the Secretary of State. There is therefore no substantial or democratic argument for excluding the option of independence from the ballot paper. The option of independence is supported by many people in Scotland. We have been through the argument in democratic terms many times, when Governments have either refused to consult the people of Scotland or said that the people of Scotland did not have a decisive view one way or the other.

The Secretary of State was kind enough to say in his opening remarks that my cuttings file was more extensive than his. I suspect that it is not that my file is more extensive, but that we keep different quotations. I have kept a number of quotations about the Secretary of State and his previous support for a multi-option referendum.

On 13 April 1992, *The Daily Telegraph* reported that the Secretary of State, then the hon. Member for Glasgow, Garscadden, said:

"the party's 49 Scottish MPs would campaign"—

I assume that he was committing the hon. Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) to such a campaign at that stage—

"for a multi-option referendum on the country's political future, something which had been endorsed at the meeting of all Scottish Labour MPs."

In a speech to the Scottish Trades Union Congress in Dundee, the Secretary of State repeated that call. *The Scotsman* reported:

"Calling for the democratic case for a referendum to be shouted from the rooftops. Mr. Dewar said that the Government should not take refuge in a rigged referendum on proposals which did no more than tinker with the present problem."

After the 1992 election, in which, incidentally, the Scottish National party got fewer votes and won fewer seats than it has now, such a view was widely shared across the parliamentary Labour party. The late John Smith said in the *Daily Record* in July 1992:

"The Labour Party must keep the Scottish issue at the centre of the political stage. That's why we are campaigning for a multi-option referendum."

The Scottish TUC supported the argument for a multi-option referendum. A new political grouping, Scotland United, was formed, which argued forcefully for and mobilised opinion on the case for a multi-option referendum. Indeed, Scotland United's campaigning document, "What Price Democracy?", noted:

"one of the big problems with the 1979 referendum was the absence from the ballot paper of the independence option, which meant that a significant section of the Scottish population was denied the opportunity to vote for their preferred option."

Such a democratic viewpoint was well reflected in early-day motions such as one tabled by William McKelvey, the then hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun, on 8 December 1992. The option to hold a multi-option referendum on the governance of Scotland was supported by 26 hon. Members across the parliamentary Labour party—many of whom have been present in this debate. One amendment to the early-day motion was tabled by David Shaw, the then hon. Member for Dover, who managed to introduce the subject of Monklands district council into the issue of a multi-option referendum, but managed to acquire only one signature, his own.

The argument for a multi-option referendum was widely supported because it was felt to be fair that a proper test of opinion, if a test of opinion were required, should reflect the three major constitutional options that were on offer to the Scottish people.

Hon. Members may not be aware that there are a number of constitutional precedents on the question of a multi-option referendum, including those set by the House of Commons. In Newfoundland in the late 1940s, for example, a constitutional convention met. It decided that only two options for its constitutional future should be presented to the people of Newfoundland. However, the Attlee Privy Council—the Privy Council of a Labour Government with a landslide majority—decided that that would not be fair. In their response to the Newfoundland constitutional convention, the Government stated:

"The Government have come to a conclusion that it would not be right that the people of Newfoundland should be deprived of an opportunity of considering the issue, and they have, therefore, decided that confederation with Canada should be included as a third choice on the referendum paper".

The option of confederation with Canada eventually came top of the referendum, even if the majority in favour was less than the majority in favour of devolution in the 1979 referendum in Scotland.

Both in terms of previous support for the democratic option of allowing people in Scotland the free choice between independence, devolution and the status quo,

and in terms of precedents and proceedings in the House, there is substantial support for the idea that a multi-option referendum is not just feasible but desirable when there are distinct blocs of support for constitutional options.

I have heard the Conservative party in Scotland say that it was greatly encouraged during the general election campaign by an opinion poll that showed that support for the status quo in Scotland had reached 30 per cent. That point has been made many times as the Conservative party ranks have delved over the entrails of electoral carnage. They have said, "Well, there is still hope because support for the status quo reached 30 per cent. in an ICM poll." ICM is a reputable polling organisation, although I should mention that it was the same polling organisation that gave Labour a 5 per cent. lead across the United Kingdom during the election campaign. None the less, the poll indicated that there was a bloc of support for the status quo.

I would be encouraged by a poll on the referendum in *The Sunday Times*, which showed that the number of those preferring independence and of those preferring devolution was tied at 35 per cent. I would argue that most polling on the independence question has shown such a level of support over recent years. The essential truth is that I do not know, and no one in the House basically knows, what the preferred option of the Scottish people would be after a referendum campaign offering all the constitutional options. The hon. Member for Dunfermline, West (Ms Squire) shakes her head, which is interesting. Some results of opinion polls are consistent. For example, no opinion poll in recent years in Scotland that has laid out the three constitutional options has shown a majority in favour of devolution.

Ms Rachel Squire (Dunfermline, West): The people of Scotland have just had a referendum that gave them the three options of the status quo, devolution or independence. It was called a general election, it was held on 1 May and a majority of the Scottish people voted for devolution.

Mr. Salmond: Then why are we having another referendum? The hon. Lady says that the general election gave a mandate. If the general election gave a mandate, Labour should go ahead and legislate for its devolution proposal. If the general election did not provide a mandate and the Labour party wishes to consult the people, it should consult the people democratically on the major constitutional options that are available. The hon. Lady and the new Labour Government cannot have the argument both ways. Given that the Government have chosen to go through the consultation process, it is an early blot on their record not to make the democratic choice available to the Scottish people. I suspect that Ministers in their quieter moments, even in the midst of their euphoria, know that to be true.

The Government's proposals have not been furnished for this debate, and one of the few reasonable points that have been made by Conservatives today is that the Bill mentions Government proposals that have yet to be published. I await the White Paper with interest. I hope that it is constructive and that it will be published soon. I was encouraged by the remarks of the Secretary of State for Scotland when he referred to the Claim of Right. He was a signatory and co-author of that document as the leader of the Labour party in Scotland.

[Mr. Salmond]

Hon. Members will remember that the Claim of Right referred to the

"sovereign right of the Scottish people to determine a form of Government best suited to their needs."

It did not suggest that

"sovereignty resides with English Members of Parliament and that's the way it will stay."

There is an essential difference between those two attitudes to sovereignty, and I was encouraged because the Secretary of State seemed to indicate that he was staying true to the Claim of Right. If that is the case in the White Paper, and if it does not obstruct democracy, the Scottish National party will not obstruct the White Paper.

7.12 pm

Mr. David Stewart (Inverness, East, Nairn and Lochaber): It is with a mixture of trepidation and awe that I prepare to make my maiden speech this evening. I thank hon. Members and officials for their help in the past few weeks. I also add my congratulations on the three contributions from the other hon. Members who have made maiden speeches. They are a hard act to follow. I also wish to thank the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Mr. Salmond) for his remarks about Conservative voting behaviour in my constituency, which I shall bear in mind.

Sir Winston Churchill described his maiden speech as a terrible, thrilling yet delicious experience. Disraeli's maiden speech in 1837 took three hours to complete and, at the end, he was shouted down. I assure hon. Members that I shall not take three hours, but whether I am shouted down is a decision for them.

I shall start by paying tribute to my predecessor, Sir Russell Johnston, who was the Member of Parliament for my constituency from 1964. Sir Russell Johnston was an intelligent and articulate Member, who was steeped in the history and culture of the highlands, and it was my privilege to meet him during the 1987 election campaign. He is a man of great integrity and conviction, interlaced with a dry sense of humour. He has fought for highland interests for 30 years and achieved many great successes. I am sure that hon. Members on both sides of the House wish to pay tribute to Sir Russell Johnston on his retirement from the Commons and to send their best wishes to him on his elevation to the other place.

The highlands have a rich and proud history of political radicalism. Honesty, fairness, social justice and a strong sense of community are our values. They are old and enduring values in the best highland tradition. An early champion of the highlands was Charles Mackintosh, who made his maiden speech in 1874. He was a rarity as a radical crofting Member of Parliament who piloted crofting legislation through the House, which changed the rights and responsibilities of tenants against the powerful interests of large landowners.

As a highlander, I am proud to be the first Labour Member to represent the constituency of Inverness, East, Nairn and Lochaber. It is a unique constituency because, during the election campaign, it was the only four-way marginal in the United Kingdom. It has the highest mountains and the deepest lochs. It has the beauty of Glencoe and Loch Ness and the isolated splendour of the

islands of Rhum, Canna, Muck and, of course, Eigg, which chose self-rule instead of the dead hand of absentee landlordism.

The constituency is of tremendous size—750,000 hectares. It stretches from the North sea to the Atlantic. Tourism is very important. It is responsible for 20 per cent. of the highlands' gross domestic product and it supports more than 20,000 jobs throughout the highlands. That is why transport is so important in my constituency and why I shall campaign for a reduction in the price of petrol and diesel, which is extortionate in the highlands and islands.

Inverness is the capital of the highlands and has seen some historic events, although some hon. Members may not be aware of them. For example, Inverness is the only place in which the full Cabinet has met outwith the Cabinet Office. In 1921, the Cabinet met at the conference that agreed the treaty that created the Irish Free State. Members present included Lloyd George, the Prime Minister, Austen Chamberlain and Winston Churchill. This evening, I extend an invitation to the current Cabinet to visit Inverness without the need to sign a treaty.

Several members of the Cabinet visited the constituency during the general election campaign. I pay tribute to everyone who did so, especially the Prime Minister. Not many hon. Members will know this, but he played in goal for my local football team, Inverness Caledonian Thistle. Shortly afterwards, the team won the third division championship. Something obviously rubbed off. I must report to the House however that, since 1 May, my team has lost three games in a row. The Inverness provost, Allan Sellars, remarked to me at a recent game that that had never happened under the Conservatives.

My constituency is also the stronghold of the world's oldest team sport—shinty. Legend has it that the game was played by saints and scholars, which suggests that the House has never had a shinty team. Although annual matches are played by exiles at Stamford Bridge, the venue is closer to the heart of my hon. Friend the Minister for sport than the noble and ancient game of shinty. In antiquity, shinty replaced clan warfare as a way to settle internal disputes, so I warmly commend it to the Conservatives. The Camanachd cup final will be played on 7 June at Fort William, itself a cradle of the game. This year's finalists are the ancient rivals, Kingussie and Newtonmore, which is a heartland of the sport and now a haven for skiers who flock to the Cairngorms.

I welcome and support the Bill, which will pave the way for a long-awaited Scottish Parliament, a new dynamic Parliament with more young people and more women, which will tackle the chronic problems of the highlands—low pay, poverty, a lack of housing, poor bus services and growing hospital waiting lists. Those are the failures of the past 18 years. We need a new approach.

People might ask what a Labour Government will do. Let them come to the highlands and see the faces of the unemployed young people who have been cast aside like unwanted pieces on a chess board. People might ask what a Labour Government will do. Let them come to the highlands and see the low-paid hotel workers in Nairn and Aviemore. People might ask what a Labour Government will do. Let them come to the highlands and see the quango state in operation—that system of patronage that would bring a blush to the cheeks of a mediaeval monarch.

The Labour Government offer the prospects of radical change for the highlands. In 1964, with two Labour Members of Parliament in the highlands and islands, Harold Wilson made his historic pledge to establish a Highlands and Islands development board, which stopped the depopulation of the highlands and transformed the area. In 1997, with two Labour Members of Parliament in the highlands and islands, we can bring power back to the highlands, by creating a Scottish Parliament—the dream of Keir Hardie, and the unfinished business of John Smith.

I was privileged to meet John Smith in the highlands. I remember his speech in Ullapool one warm spring evening, when he spoke with passion about creating the Scottish Parliament, and about his dream of being the first highland Prime Minister. His tragic death brought an end to the latter goal, but now the torch has passed to the present Prime Minister and to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland.

It is time that we seized this historic opportunity. We owe it to the people of Scotland to deliver a powerful Scottish Parliament. As a highland Member, I pledge to do everything in my power to fulfil the demand of a double yes vote during the referendum campaign. If it is the will of the Scottish people, the creation of a Scottish Parliament will light a fiery cross from mountain to mountain through the highlands, signalling a new era of hope and opportunity.

7.20 pm

Mr. Richard Livsey (Brecon and Radnorshire): It is a great privilege to follow the hon. Member for Inverness, East, Nairn and Lochaber (Mr. Stewart), who gave such an eloquent maiden speech. I appreciated the delightful highland tones that came through—something with which I am familiar.

I also thank the hon. Gentleman for his fulsome tribute to my former colleague, Sir Russell Johnston, who served the House so well. The hon. Gentleman arrives with a true radical highland pedigree, and I can see that he has a great future in the House. I was delighted to hear his speech, as I was to hear the other maiden speeches that we heard this evening. The new Members have made a great contribution.

My Welsh constituency, Brecon and Radnorshire, is the third largest in Britain. The hon. Member for Inverness, East, Nairn and Lochaber probably represents what is, in geographical terms, the largest, and much of what he said about transport and remoteness applies as much to my constituency, where there are many problems similar to those that he described.

Devolution for Wales is fundamental to the good governance of Britain—of the whole United Kingdom. Liberal Democrats regard that as most important. The previous Member for Brecon and Radnorshire, Jonathan Evans, whom I defeated at the general election, did much good work for Wales during his tenure as a Welsh Office Minister. However, he stood firmly for the status quo on devolution.

My predecessor believed that the status quo was satisfactory, and he was swept away in the general election on 1 May 1997. The result was the 40th to be declared in Wales. I was the person who removed the last Conservative Member of Parliament from Wales, and with him much of what I would describe as the "incredibility" of Conservative policy on the status quo.

The result was declared on 2 May, which, by happy coincidence, was my birthday. In my acceptance speech, I asked Jonathan Evans what he thought of proportional representation now, when his party, having polled 19.5 per cent. of the votes in Wales, had no Members elected to the Westminster Parliament, whereas the Liberal Democrats, who had polled 12.3 per cent., had two, and Plaid Cymru, with 10 per cent. of the votes in Wales, had four. That is a real conundrum, which constitutional reform will have to put right.

The people of my native Brecon and Radnorshire want a fair outcome on devolution, and we have now reached something of a constitutional crisis, with no Conservative Members in either Wales or Scotland. The status quo has been totally eclipsed, and the arguments advanced by Conservative Members today are dead and buried; they were eclipsed at the general election. Conservative Members must, as some Conservatives in Wales are already doing, go back to the drawing board and have second thoughts. Some are now talking about the possibility of supporting a Welsh Assembly.

I believe that the people of Wales need a Welsh Assembly, and my party has been campaigning for a Welsh Parliament for the past 100 years. We are now on the threshold of achieving a modest level of democratic accountability in Wales; at the moment, there is a huge democratic deficit there, because Wales has been largely ruled by quangos spending up to 40 per cent. of the Welsh Office budget, to which the Conservatives have appointed members of their own party who have not been at all representative of the democratic situation in the country.

The Government's proposals for a Welsh Assembly are not exactly earth shattering. Liberal Democrats in Wales would like to see the creation of a Sennedd, with more teeth than the proposed Assembly. Our litmus test would be, first, that the Senate must be able to legislate; secondly, that it must have tax-raising or lowering powers; and, thirdly, that it should have true proportional representation.

We would like a 75-Member Assembly. According to the formula proposed by Labour, 40 Members would then be elected by the first-past-the-post system, and 35 would be chosen on an additional Member basis. That would give a precisely proportional system, reflecting the votes cast in Wales. I do not think that the 60-Member Assembly proposed by Labour would fall within the inclusive spirit that Welsh Office Ministers claim the Assembly will embody, so I hope that there will be scope to amend the proposals when the Bill for Wales is introduced after the referendum.

The test that Liberal Democrats will apply in Wales will be whether the Assembly allows fair representation in terms of geography—balancing the north, south, east and west—in terms of the political balance of parties, and in terms of gender, as judged by the number of men and women within it. If the Government genuinely wish to produce an inclusive Assembly, clearly the proportionality of the voting system must be addressed further.

The idea of introducing a referendum for Wales has the wholehearted support of Liberal Democrats there. I believe that the Secretary of State and his Ministers are men of honour, and we have no difference of opinion about the question that will appear on the ballot paper in Wales. We are indeed in favour of a Welsh Assembly, and it is entirely right that we should support its creation.

[Mr. Richard Livsey]

As a party, we shall campaign for a yes vote, and we shall be happy to do so. I can therefore leave Welsh Office Ministers in no doubt that that will happen.

The chances of establishing a Welsh Assembly have been few and far between, especially in this century. We must therefore grasp the opportunity now, and we must show leadership. In my experience of life, nothing worth while is ever gained without courage and resolution, and that is what we shall demonstrate in the referendum campaign.

Welsh Liberal Democrat Members will not vote against the Bill. The proposed devolution of power to a Welsh Assembly needs all the help that it can get, and my hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire (Mr. Öpik) and I will campaign for a successful outcome. However, we feel that it was unwise of the Government to decide on a Bill combining the Scottish and Welsh referendums. The Bill is hybrid, and includes the proposals for both countries. That creates difficulties in that the questions in the Bill are different, and the subsequent legislation may be different, too. It must be noted that the proposals for Scotland create difficulties for my Scottish colleagues. I am sure that they will continue to make their position clear, both in the debate and elsewhere.

Naturally, for the sake of consistency, Welsh Liberal Democrats would wish to give a Welsh Sennedd the same powers as those conferred on a Scottish Parliament. Undoubtedly, we will try to amend the subsequent Welsh Bill to that effect. In the meantime, it is our considered view that it is vital to secure a yes vote for a Welsh Assembly in the referendum. Wales needs and deserves that outcome.

7.30 pm

Mr. John Home Robertson (East Lothian): It is a pleasure to welcome back the hon. Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Mr. Livsey). I remember spending a happy week in beautiful weather in Brecon and Radnor at a by-election. I was sorry he won that time, but I was one of those who rejoiced when his result was announced on 2 May to complete the establishment of Scotland and Wales as Tory-free zones.

This has been a remarkable debate, and I join others in paying tribute to my hon. Friends the Members for Aberdeen, South (Miss Begg), for Cumbernauld and Kilsyth (Ms McKenna) and for Inverness, East, Nairn and Lochaber (Mr. Stewart) for their excellent maiden speeches. They have made their mark already, and I look forward to working with them in the future, particularly as we work towards the establishment of a Parliament for Scotland.

When a constitution appears to have fallen into decay and when people begin to hold the democratic system to be a matter for despair—if not contempt—there are serious problems in the fabric of our state. Until 1 May, too many young people in particular felt that the democratic system was not working—that it did not matter what happened, we would always have a Tory Government who would be able to ride roughshod over everybody else. There is now an atmosphere of hope generated by the general election result and we have to take that forward.

We need a change in our constitutional arrangements to ensure that the democratic system works, and is seen to work, effectively and fairly, around the country. It is

not a time for separatism—that idea was defeated at the election. However, it is a time for radical constitutional change. I welcome the fact that this Bill is the first to be presented to Parliament by the Government, and that it is designed to start the process of establishing a Parliament for Scotland. The Parliament will take democratic control of the £15 billion budget of the Scottish Office, as well as a swathe of legislative and administrative responsibilities. Furthermore, the Bill will give appropriate discretion on the Budget to that Parliament in the future.

Above all, I welcome the fact that the Bill provides a mechanism that will entrench the position of the Scottish Parliament for all time. I am worried that Conservative Members are already looking for alibis and ways to nitpick to allow them perhaps to sidestep the result of a referendum in the future. They will not be allowed to get away with that.

In making this plea to the House, I should perhaps ask for a number of other offences to be taken into account. I was the constituency delegate—rather a young one, I have to say—to the Labour party conference in Blackpool in 1976 who moved the motion that committed my party to the principle of home rule for Scotland. It has been a long time waiting, but I am delighted that we are now getting rather nearer to it. I certainly campaigned for a yes vote in the 1979 referendum, and it is worth remembering that we won that referendum with a majority of 77,435—good enough in any other circumstances, but the incoming Tory Government were not interested in such results. Furthermore, I have raised this issue again and again—along with a number of colleagues—and used all the devices available to a Back Bencher ever since the disastrous day when Margaret Thatcher came to power and introduced more and more centralised government in this country.

The commitment to Scottish home rule goes with the job of being the Member of Parliament for East Lothian—with one or two aberrations, such as the right hon. Member for Devizes (Mr. Ancram), who passed through my constituency briefly in 1974.

Mr. Wallace: Is it not possible that, in 1974, even the right hon. Member for Devizes (Mr. Ancram) as in favour of home rule?

Mr. Home Robertson: I should have checked the cuttings, but I have a suspicion that the right hon. Gentleman has shifted his ground on that issue, as he has on others. We should pursue him on that if he serves on the Committee—or if he ends up as the shadow Secretary of State for Scotland, as some have threatened. We shall draw a veil over that visitor to Berwickshire and East Lothian.

My immediate predecessor, John Mackintosh, was one of the most powerful advocates of a Scottish Parliament in the 1960s and 1970s. I vividly remember sitting in the Public Gallery, watching him stand in this very place making the case for Scottish home rule all those years ago. We have been stuck for far too long and it is time to get on with the job.

The Member who represented East Lothian in the last Scottish Parliament in 1707 was the great Andrew Fletcher of Saltoun, who gave eloquent and accurate warnings of the perils of the “incorporating union” which has left Scotland as a jurisdiction without a legislature

for the past 290 years. The experience of centralised and uncontrollable government at the Scottish Office in the past 18 years must make a conclusive and irrefutable case for home rule in Scotland now—the sooner, the better.

The quaint fiction that this Parliament can be an effective protector of the rights and interests of people in Scotland was finally exposed when this House of Commons voted overwhelmingly to impose the poll tax in Scotland in 1987. I have had private conversations with English Conservative Members of Parliament—some who are still in the House, and others who have departed—and I have asked them how they could possibly have voted to impose such an unfair and unworkable tax on my constituents in East Lothian which would not apply to their constituents south of the border. The reply was always the same—they did not know what they were voting for, but trusted the then Secretary of State for Scotland and voted in accordance with the Government Whip.

That was the worst measure, but there have been plenty more—the centralising of the NHS in Scotland, local government reform and the endless catalogue of quangos. It has always been absurd to put exclusively Scottish business through the House, but the experience of the Thatcher years has demonstrated that it is dangerous. A nominally democratic system allowed a minority to treat the nation of Scotland with absolute contempt and nothing like that must ever be possible again. That will change when we implement the package of reforms agreed by the Scottish Constitutional Convention.

I have some anxieties about the Bill. It may be difficult to persuade people to come out to vote when there is no noticeable opposition. At the general election in Scotland, 60 per cent. of the voters supported parties committed to Scottish home rule within the United Kingdom; 22 per cent. voted for total independence; and 17 per cent. voted for the status quo.

With great respect to Conservative Members and to the hon. Member for Angus (Mr. Welsh), who is in his place representing the Scottish National party, the Conservative and Scottish National parties were the single-issue parties at the general election in Scotland. The Scottish National party's single issue was independence, while the Conservative party tried to make the present state of the United Kingdom the single issue that it hoped people would endorse. Both those extremes were rejected overwhelmingly, and there is a consensus for what John Smith referred to rightly as

"the settled will of the Scottish people."

That is not controversial, and since there is no credible challenge to this proposition—not even from the ranks of what is left of the Conservative party in Scotland—it may be difficult to galvanise people to come out again to vote for the obvious, particularly when the concept of a referendum as a constitutional device is not a familiar one in any part of the United Kingdom. There have been only two referendums in Scotland hitherto, and the result of one was overturned at the whim of an incoming Conservative Government—which, perhaps, does not bode awfully well.

As we proceed with this referendum—and since the Government have plans for other referendums on the European single currency and on electoral reform—perhaps the time has come for a new statute to establish the position of referendums in the British constitution. Should it be entirely up to the Government—of whatever

persuasion—to decide what use should be made of referendums, or should there be an overarching constitutional provision to deal with that matter? What guidelines should there be on the conduct of referendums and the drafting of the questions?

I have one detailed point for my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State. I hope that the questions on the ballot paper will clearly require a yes or a no and are as clear as possible. Above all, what is the real significance of the result of a referendum? At present, as I understand it, a referendum result can only be advisory and for the consideration of this sovereign Parliament. Should we be making it binding on Parliament or on future Governments? There is a case for considering that option and finding a device for doing so, particularly as Conservatives are already considering ways in which they can shrug off the result of this referendum.

I confess that I am not an enthusiast for the concept of referendums, but I fully endorse this one as a mechanism to entrench the position of Scotland's Parliament for all time. I support the Bill and urge people throughout Scotland to turn out in numbers and to vote yes to both questions when the referendum takes place.

7.40 pm

Mr. Donald Gorrie (Edinburgh, West): Before I get into the argument, it gives me great pleasure to pay tribute to my predecessor, Lord James Douglas-Hamilton. He is widely liked as an individual and, although it is a trite remark, he is almost universally regarded as a very nice man. He was particularly noted for his politeness, whether it took the form, on occasions, of giving lifts to Opposition canvassers on rainy evenings, or of insisting on opening the door for his female departmental chauffeur. He did extremely well to hold his seat for so long against repeated and energetic campaigns by my party. At the count in Edinburgh, where six constituencies held their counts, he was largely regarded as having made the best speech of the evening, which is a great testament to his character on an evening when he lost.

Also, it gives me great pleasure to pay tribute to my constituency. I have wooed it long enough. This was my fifth attempt to win it and, counting local and national elections, I think that my score is won 14, lost eight, so I have shown my enthusiasm for west Edinburgh. It is an area that is steeped in history. We learned some of that again recently when a splendid Roman lion in stone was dug out of the River Almond, which reminds us of the time when the Romans tried unsuccessfully to keep the Picts at bay. We have fine mediaeval churches and tower houses. We have two schools that are more than 350 years old and many fine modern schools. We have stately homes and housing estates that are less stately. We have the Union canal, from the heyday of Scottish industrialisation, which is shortly to benefit from a great injection of money from the millennium fund. We have the Forth road bridge—I suppose that I claim half and Fife presumably claims the other half—which is a great icon of British Victorian development. There are many things in the past of which we can be proud.

Politically, in the days when Mr. Gladstone represented Midlothian, a good deal of what is now west Edinburgh came into his constituency. He campaigned for Irish home rule with great vigour until an advanced age. I hope that we can achieve Scottish home rule more rapidly.

[Mr. Donald Gorrie]

My constituents would greatly benefit from a Scottish Parliament, because the present Government system has let them down. In many parts of my constituency, houses desperately need investment. We have schools that need investment and more teachers and equipment. We have colleges where young people do not have enough resources and have a bleak outlook for getting a career that they would like to pursue. We have a fine hospital, for which local people have fought several successful campaigns against the local health board, which tries to remove all the best facilities. The hospital needs greater investment and, like other hospitals, needs many more nurses and doctors who need to be better paid.

We have problems that other areas may also have. The successful edge-of-town shopping centre has caused the ruination of many of our suburban shopping centres. We have a desperate need for investment in public transport, both railway and busway. The council is trying to do something about that, but there is a need for Government assistance to oil the wheels, metaphorically speaking, making it easier for public and private money to come together, rather than operating in the convoluted way that was determined by the previous Government.

We have the greatest traffic problem in Scotland—not as great, perhaps, as some such problems in England, but the situation is bad and needs attention, again at central Government and local government levels.

Above all, we do not need a second Forth road bridge, which was threatened by the previous Government, or the so-called Barnton bypass, which was almost universally condemned. I hope that the Scottish Office will rapidly show that it is not pursuing those foolish ideas.

We need a system in which communities can be helped to revive themselves. A Scottish Parliament would give a great opportunity for doing things better and for helping people to help themselves, instead of having a begging-bowl mentality and blaming London all the time, which is what we tend to do.

On the Bill, there are two main issues: one is home rule; the other is whether we need a referendum. On home rule, I agree with those who think that sovereignty lies with the people and not with Parliament. Whether they are Scottish people, English, Welsh or Irish, they have the sovereignty and we are merely lent it to look after for a short while.

This House is an example of how not to run the affairs of Scotland. We really must invent a Scottish Parliament that conducts its affairs better than this. It is a travesty of democracy that the system here—put into effect conscientiously by the various people occupying the Chair—does not allow those parties that provide all the Opposition Members in Scotland and Wales to speak to and vote on the amendments that they have tabled on this vital issue. In what other democratic body would that be allowed? The whole thing is a travesty.

Having been here such a short time, it might be wrong of me to say so, but my enthusiasm for a Scottish Parliament increases with every day that I spend at Westminster, and that is partly due to listening to the English Conservatives.

Mr. Rhodri Morgan: We cannot listen to any Scottish or Welsh ones.

Mr. Gorrie: Bring them back. All is forgiven.

A Government health warning should be attached to English Conservatives, because listening to them gives any red-blooded Scotsman a heart attack; they simply do not understand. I am sure that they are worthy representatives of the shires and suburbs, but they understand nothing about Scotland. Occasionally, they go there to shoot grouse. If they read a book, they occasionally come to the Edinburgh festival, perhaps, but they understand nothing whatsoever about Scotland. They display the sort of arrogance that previous British people perhaps displayed to some of their colonies. Their conversations are similar to the conversation that Edward II had with some of his cronies when riding away from the battle of Bannockburn and planning the following year's invasion. He took 10 years before he was compelled to make peace. I hope for their sakes that the Conservatives will learn a little quicker.

On the referendum, I must make the following points, which my colleagues have already made to some degree. It is wrong to combine the Scottish and Welsh referendums in one Bill. It is a marriage of inconvenience, because the positions in Scotland and in Wales are quite different. The form of Parliament proposed for Wales is totally different from that proposed for Scotland, and the local political position and level of support for the concept are different. The Welsh have not had a convention that has come up with an agreed scheme.

It is unnecessary to have the referendum. In 1992, the Conservatives marginally improved their position in Scotland, in terms of both seats and votes, and they hailed that as complete support for the status quo. On this occasion, they have suffered the greatest defeat anywhere, in my limited knowledge of political history. At least the Canadian Tories held two seats; in Scotland and Wales the score was 112-0: there are 40 Welsh and 72 Scottish seats, and the Tories hold none. Surely that teaches us something and gives us a message that the Government can go ahead with their legislation for the convention scheme.

We are against the second question, which is remarkably foolish and will be read by many people as, "You really do want to pay more taxes, don't you?" However it is worded, that is how it will be seen and there is a great risk that it will be lost.

Logically—this will appeal to the Secretary of State, who is an intelligent man—the second question opens the door to the Scottish National party, because if, as he said in his speech, the referendum is to endorse the Scottish convention scheme, that is a reasonable proposition; but to ask whether there should be tax-raising powers is to consult on a scheme that no one is proposing, in which case the argument against the SNP having its scheme on the ballot paper disappears entirely. The second question is logically unsound and politically idiotic. The convention scheme was a great example of co-operation and I hope that it will lead to better politics.

My final reason for opposing the referendum is the way in which it was imposed on us by diktat from London; it was the worst sort of old-style politics. We are trying to achieve a new politics of co-operation in Scotland. I have co-operated with many Labour Members, and I have greatly admired their efforts in the Scottish convention. I hope that that can continue.

We may argue about the small print, but we must get it across that the ideal of people running their own affairs is a great ideal and a great moral cause. We need

somebody with Gladstone's eloquence to get that across. Wallace and Bruce did not make speeches before their battles about whether there might be three groats more in the tithes. That is not what we are concerned about: we are concerned about the great cause of whether people can run their own affairs, as we believe they should.

7.52 pm

Dr. Lynda Clark (Edinburgh, Pentlands): It is a great privilege to be able to make a contribution to this debate, especially in view of the wisdom and passion of those who have spoken before me. I hope that the hon. Member for Edinburgh, West (Mr. Corrie) will continue the tradition of giving people a lift home on rainy nights; if ever I need a lift, I shall certainly approach him.

I should say at the outset that this is a maiden speech. I mention that partly to get my plea in mitigation in early, and partly because I have discovered that the word maiden can be defined as a Scottish beheading machine, similar to the guillotine. That raised some anxiety in my mind; I was reassured when I found no mention of it in "Erskine May", but I wondered whether it might be in some Scottish appendix that I had not yet found.

It is customary for a new Member to refer to her predecessor; I am pleased to follow that custom. My predecessor, Mr. Malcolm Rifkind, was fortunate enough to enjoy a high reputation in the House and an international reputation as Foreign Secretary in the previous Conservative Administration. We share a common history and training as members of the Faculty of Advocates. As a Scots lawyer, I hope that brevity has been inculcated into me.

I pay tribute to Mr. Rifkind's illustrious career and long service as a constituency Member of Parliament. I wondered whether I should apologise to Conservative Members for having reduced their options in their desperate search for a new leader.

On one matter, I am pleased to adopt Mr. Rifkind's words. Quoting Victor Hugo, he said:

"Nothing is so powerful as an idea whose time has come."—
[Official Report, 16 December 1976; Vol. 922, c. 1831.]

He was referring to devolution. I invite the House to ponder those words in the context of this debate. My predecessor was eloquent and learned and had a great respect for the traditions of the House; he was also justly proud of Edinburgh, Pentlands, my new constituency.

It is my great good fortune to represent a constituency that stands only a few miles from the centre of Edinburgh and the likely seat of the new Scottish Parliament. In some respects, my constituency can be seen as a microcosm of Scotland, consisting of highland and lowland, town and country. The highland area takes the dramatic shape of the beautiful Pentland hills that cradle the urban lowland.

In the urban areas there is a powerful juxtaposition of poverty and wealth, and my constituency has been described as one of the most deeply socially divided in Britain. Under the previous Administration, those divisions deepened and festered. It is part of the new Government's duty to help to heal those divisions. Every constituent from every area has something to offer and must feel included. For my part, I offer to serve the interests of all my constituents to the best of my ability.

The Bill provides for referendums in Scotland and Wales, and I welcome both. Hon. Members will excuse me if I confine my remarks to Scotland, because I know

more about it. The time for devolution came many years ago—the principle can be defended on the grounds of historical precedent, democratic accountability, administrative efficiency and popular demand—but the opportunity was lost.

There have been false starts, false hopes and false prophets, but now we are fortunate to have a new opportunity. Now is the time to let the people who live in Scotland make their voice heard again. This debate marks an historic opportunity. We are taking the first steps towards bringing about profound and necessary changes. We must not do that without full debate.

Every generation must re-examine the principles of democracy and test their effectiveness. Every generation needs voices such as those of Thomas Paine, the Chartists or the suffragettes. Equality, fairness, accountability and effectiveness are the standards by which we must judge our democratic institutions.

The Bill represents an historic opportunity for those governed in Scotland to judge their institutions and vote for a new Scottish Parliament with devolved and tax-varying powers. That means not only a transfer of governmental responsibilities, but that decisions that directly affect individuals living in Scotland will be made with reference to their elected representatives.

I commend the Bill to the House. I support it because it honours the finest principles of democracy. In supporting democracy we help to establish a society in which other great principles of fairness and natural justice can flourish.

7.59 pm

Mr. Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury): It is a privilege to make my first speech in such an important debate. I congratulate the hon. Members who have made such excellent maiden speeches. I pay tribute to the courage and determination of the hon. Member for Edinburgh, West (Mr. Gorrie), who has arrived at the House after five attempts. Although it has not taken me five attempts, I know how he feels. I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley), who made an excellent speech, to the Labour Members who spoke so well and to the hon. Ladies who have spoken with such wit, charm and wisdom.

All those hon. Ladies on the Labour Benches present something of a problem to the hon. Ladies on the Conservative Benches because they get mistaken for Labour Members. Given what was said earlier, I am not sure whether it is worse to be mistaken for a Labour Member's wife or for a Labour Member. The thought of that persuaded my wife to stand for Gloucestershire county council rather than Parliament. Happily, 2 May provided an opportunity for a double celebration, at least in Tewkesbury.

It really was a celebration, because it is a great privilege to represent such a wonderful constituency. Tewkesbury has many urban parts but the countryside has been described as

"A place of gentle contrasts."

My arrival in Tewkesbury was a more severe contrast than might have been thought. In 1471, there was a famous battle at Tewkesbury in the war of the roses. It was won by the Yorkists, as many hon. Members will know. I am glad to say that the 1997 battle of Tewkesbury was

[*Mr. Laurence Robertson*]

convincingly won by a Lancastrian. It gives me great pleasure to serve as the first Member of Parliament for Tewkesbury as a seat in itself for more than 100 years.

It is the custom of the House to pay tribute to one's predecessors. That may take me a while because the seat has been cobbled together from several different constituencies. Most of it was contained in the old seat of Cirencester and Tewkesbury, which was represented with such distinction by Nicholas Ridley. I pay tribute to his successor, my hon. Friend the Member for Cotswold (Mr. Clifton-Brown), who represented the seat with great distinction for five years. I thank him also for the help that he gave me. I am pleased to pay tribute to the work of the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Mr. Jones), part of whose constituency I have taken. Last, but by no means least, I pay tribute to Paul Marland who unfortunately lost his seat, partly because of the boundary changes, and partly because of the swing against the Conservatives. I took quite a chunk of his seat, for which he does not thank me.

We in Tewkesbury somewhat bucked the national trend. I like to think that that was at least partly due to the clear ideas that we put to the electorate. I stood on an unashamedly British ticket, fighting against European federalism and stressing the need for and benefits of preserving the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. It has been said before, but it is my firm belief that the United Kingdom as a whole is stronger than the sum of its parts. Our strength has been built together. Thanks to the strength of the Union, and in no small part thanks to 18 years of Conservative government, the new Labour Government inherit a strong, prosperous, united nation.

It is impossible to separate the Bill from the wider issue of devolution, and impossible to separate devolution from the prospect of the United Kingdom breaking up. Devolution could usher in the beginning of the end of the United Kingdom. I have no interest to declare as such, but I have something of a love affair with Scotland. It is incorrect to assume that English Members have no knowledge of Scotland. I have spent much time there and, indeed, worked there for a while. I have a great passion for Scotland. That is why I am so determined that it should remain part of the United Kingdom.

I see great danger for Scotland in moving down the devolutionary road. Scotland could be left to fend for itself as a small country in a hostile European Union. The hard-earned freedom that it would have gained from the United Kingdom would soon be snatched away by the federalist tendencies of that body. In such circumstances, what strength would Scotland have to fight against the federalist tendencies that it once wanted to throw off?

I am not convinced that the suggested great, demonstrable demand for devolution exists. Many people are making noises for it but they cannot necessarily claim to represent the views of the majority. I believe that many people in Scotland, as was acknowledged earlier, want to retain the status quo. They see no need for another layer of bureaucracy to be imposed upon them and certainly see no need for up to 3p in the pound more income tax to be levied on them.

Many people in Scotland will be against devolution. Scots who live in Scotland can vote against it but what about Scottish people who no longer live in Scotland?

They may live in another part of what they consider to be their country, the United Kingdom. We have learned from the Government this week that such people will have no say. For whatever reason, they chose to live in another part of the United Kingdom, but they should be given some say in what happens to the United Kingdom. Tearing Scotland away from the United Kingdom, which is the prospect that we face, is surely a matter for all of us. The policy of allowing only people who reside in Scotland to vote is inconsistent with existing law, which allows British people who have left our shores to continue to vote in our elections.

It has not escaped anyone's attention that the Conservative party has no representation in the House from Scotland or Wales, or, for that matter, from Northern Ireland. In general, although not this time, the Conservative party commands a majority of seats in England. It is in the interests of the Conservative party, especially with such a large hill to climb, to let the United Kingdom break up. In such circumstances, the Conservative party could enjoy almost perpetual government in England. I am not a member of a party that is interested in narrow electoral advantage. I belong to a party that believes in the wider interests of the United Kingdom. Those interests are not best served by going down the devolution route.

We are at risk from devolution and from so rapid an introduction of the Bill. People in Scotland may be persuaded to vote for devolution as a reaction against what they may have regarded as an English conspiracy to govern them. I believe in democracy; that is one reason why I joined the Conservative party. If a significant majority of Scottish people, clearly and consistently—those two words are important—showed that they wanted devolution, we would, of course, have to accept that verdict. The danger with such a rushed Bill is that if only a small majority of people in Scotland voted in favour, the Government would rush devolution through. That did not happen in 1978, when a small majority—32.9 per cent.—voted in favour, against 30.8 per cent. who voted against. The then Labour Government had insisted that at least 40 per cent. of those entitled to vote had to vote yes. The legislation fell, and so did the Labour Government shortly after. That is perhaps what worries the Government.

Given the precedents and the importance of the matter, is not it reasonable to ask the Government, before they set up a Scottish Parliament with tax-raising powers, to be absolutely sure that such an arrangement is preferred by a sizeable number of Scottish people, and not by only a small majority on a very low turnout?

Much is at stake through the Bill, including 300 years of history, the economic strength that has been achieved and the future of the United Kingdom. The issues before us should not be hurried, nor should they be treated lightly.

I conclude my remarks by thanking the House for extending its courtesy to me.

8.9 pm

Mr. John McAllion (Dundee, East): First, I congratulate the hon. Member for Tewkesbury (Mr. Robertson) on speaking with great distinction. Indeed, he made a funny speech. I am sure that he will make important contributions in future in this place and I look forward to hearing them.

I congratulate especially those of my hon. Friends who made their maiden speeches this afternoon and evening. All of them spoke with great wit and with an obvious

pride and deep knowledge of their constituencies. Having sat in my place for the past four hours or so, it has become increasingly obvious that the new intake looks better than the old lags such as myself, and sounds better. We can look forward to a much better Parliament, I am sure, over the next five years.

I offer belated congratulations to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland on his appointment. They are belated congratulations only because this is the first opportunity that I have had to offer them. If my right hon. Friend were in the Chamber, he would probably be surprised to know that during the election campaign, in conversation with my hon. Friend the Member for Dundee, West (Mr. Ross), I predicted his appointment. My hon. Friend said that I was talking through a hole that was not in my head. I, however, was proved to be right. My right hon. Friend will be even more surprised to hear that I warmly welcome his appointment. Of all the realistic contenders for the job, I am sure that most of my right hon. and hon. Friends recognised that my right hon. Friend would be the best appointee. We wish him all the very best in future.

I commend the Government on the speed with which they have introduced the Bill. They have immediately honoured a manifesto commitment and, much more importantly, they have taken the first step towards re-establishing in my country, for the first time in nearly 300 years, a directly elected Scottish Parliament. I am greatly encouraged that an incoming Labour Government, after 18 long years of exile, should embark on a legislative measure that has long been a commitment of the Labour party. I am sure that the Bill will be a significant paving measure. We hope that that will be so and that we shall not witness the fate of the previous referendum introduced by a Labour Government.

The report of the commission on the conduct of referendums describes them as having an uncertain place within our system of government and as having no established rules accepted by the main political parties for their efficient and fair conduct. Anyone who has listened to the debate will acknowledge that the truth of that is obvious. That is illustrated by two examples, and I shall remind the House of them.

First, in the 1975 referendum on whether Britain should join the Common Market, each of the two umbrella groups formed at that time—Britain in Europe and the national referendum campaign—were given Government grants of £125,000, along with the costs of printing and distributing leaflets. By the time of the 1979 referendum on Scottish devolution, however, there was no recognition for any umbrella group. Indeed, there was no public funding or support for either side. That demonstrates an inconsistency of approach.

Secondly, there is the example that was provided in 1979, when the infamous 40 per cent. rule was imposed on the yes side but not on the no side. In 1975 there was no such rule. Had there been a 50 per cent. threshold, as suggested this evening, the United Kingdom would never have joined the Common Market. Perhaps that is why the suggestion was put forward.

The inconsistency of approach towards referendums persists. Back in 1975, it was the avowed enemies of Scottish nationalism who were pressing for an additional question on independence to be included in the then referendum. There were those, like the late Norman

Buchan, who thought that by including that question the Scottish National party would be embarrassed, yet in this Parliament the Scottish National party is arguing that the option should be included in the referendum. That shows that we can never predict what will come up in Scottish politics. I am sure that the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Mr. Salmond) never thought that he would see the day when he would be following the constitutional footsteps of the late Norman Buchan. I do not know whether he or Jennie Buchan would be more worried about that. I suspect that Jennie would be more worried than the hon. Gentleman.

Historically, resort to referendums has not been founded on constitutional principles when set against the background of the House. Instead, referendums have been political expediency. They have represented the necessity of holding together a divided Government party. In 1975, and again in 1978-79, the then Labour Government, including their Back-Bench Members, were deeply divided over whether Britain should belong to the Common Market and whether there should be Scottish and Welsh devolution. Referendums were the means by which the then Labour Government sought to escape the divisions within their own ranks.

It was Lord Callaghan, a key player at that time, who described referendums as a rubber life raft into which one day the entire Labour party might have to climb. That just about summed up the experience of referendums in this place.

The question before us in this debate is whether the past experience of referendums is about to be repeated in this Parliament. The answer, I think, is that it is not. The circumstances now are very different. First, the present Government are not divided. A Scottish Parliament based on a Scottish Constitutional Convention scheme is a manifesto commitment that binds every member of the parliamentary Labour party. I am delighted that my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) is in his place to hear me say that. We are equally bound by our manifesto commitment to support both the referendums that are referred to in the Bill.

Secondly, the present Labour Government are not at the mercy of a Back-Bench rebellion. Given the majority that the Government enjoy they do not have to fear my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow, whatever schemes he may dream up over the next few weeks. I hope that he recognises that reality.

That does not mean that there will not be opposition. There must and will be opposition in any democracy, whatever a Labour Government propose. The official Opposition will continue to oppose any change whatsoever because they have yet to realise why they suffered an electoral wipe-out in Scotland and Wales. They are making the same mistakes in this Parliament that they made in the previous Parliament, mistakes which led to their defeat in those two countries.

The Scottish National party will continue to press for the independence option to be included in the referendum. It is its right to do that, and in a sense it is its duty. In doing so, the Scottish National party will represent the views of 22 per cent. of the voters in the recent general election. The Liberal Democrats will continue legitimately to ask why there should be a referendum in any event. I am not unsympathetic to that line.

[Mr. John McAllion]

I think that everyone in his or her heart will recognise that in reality we shall be passing through the parliamentary motions. Such is the strength of the Labour Government that at the end of the day the referendum that will be held in Scotland this autumn will seek a double yes vote for a Scottish Parliament with tax-gathering powers.

As for the other place, if its unelected Members try to frustrate the elected Members of this place or deny them the right to place this proposed legislation on to the statute book, I for one will look forward to an early Christmas so that there can be an early settlement of accounts with that group of aristocratic turkeys.

I shall make one or two final points to my right hon. and hon. Friends on the Government Front Bench. For a long time Scottish politics have been dominated by the idea of cross-party consensus. It has widely been assumed in Scotland that no one party will be able to deliver for the Scottish people. That turned out to be wrong. The 1997 election proved that idea to be wrong. The Government now have a Commons majority of such a size that they can deliver that which they wish. As always in Scottish politics, however, there is a twist in the tail. The Labour Government are locked into the commitment of a referendum involving all the people in Scotland. In such a referendum, the Commons majority that the Labour Government enjoy will count for nothing.

At the election, Labour polled just 46.5 per cent. of the popular vote, not enough to carry the referendum that we shall hold in the autumn—and we are not even certain that all those Labour supporters will vote “yes, yes”: a number of people in Dundee, for example, have told me that they will vote “no, yes”, “yes, no” or “no, no”, although they vote Labour in other elections. Labour Members must accept that we shall need the support of the other pro-home rule parties in Scotland if we are to carry the referendum that we are certain will be held later this year.

I was greatly encouraged by the speech that the Minister for Home Affairs and Devolution, Scottish Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Central Fife (Mr. McLeish), made at the launch of the cross-party campaign, “Forward Scotland” last Saturday in Edinburgh. In that speech, my hon. Friend reached out to all those outside the traditional Labour movement, asking them to come together in a national campaign that would win the referendum and lead to the establishment of a Scottish Parliament by a Labour Government.

The contrast between my hon. Friend's approach in 1997 and the approach taken by a Labour Government back in 1979 could not be more stark. At that time, the Scottish council of the Labour party sent an instruction to all constituency Labour party organisations in Scotland, warning them against collaboration with any body other than the Scottish Trades Union Congress or the Co-operative party. Indeed, the then Secretary of State for Scotland went on public record as saying, “Labour will not be soiling our hands by joining any umbrella ‘yes’ group.” That was sectarian and wrong, and led to defeat in 1979. I am delighted that my hon. Friends the present Ministers have learnt from that defeat, and have rejected such an approach for the current Parliament. We need a

result from the referendum, and the only way in which we can secure the result that we need is by reaching out to other parties in the home rule movement.

The debate has been dominated by the dichotomy between those who think that setting up a Scottish Parliament will be the slippery slope leading to the break-up of the United Kingdom, and those who believe that such a Parliament will provide the means by which the integrity of the United Kingdom will be preserved. I take a different position from either of those groups: I want the Scottish Parliament proposed by the Scottish Constitutional Convention because I believe that it will be the best form of government for Scotland. I want it for its own sake, not because it will lead to one development or the other.

I do not accept that—as one of my hon. Friends argued earlier—this is a matter for the chattering classes. Many people throughout Scotland feel deeply that home rule should be returned to their country. My favourite memory is of an elderly delegate who spoke at the STUC conference in 1993. He told the conference, “I wanted a Scottish Parliament when I was 20, and I still want it. I am hungry for it, and I want it before they stuff me in a wooden box and throw it on the fire.” I hope for the sake of that delegate that this Labour Government's proposals are not too late, and that the Government remember his example and do not waste any time in securing the referendum, taking the Bill to establish a Scottish Parliament through the House and bringing democracy back to Scotland.

8.22 pm

Mr. Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield): It is a great pleasure to be able to speak in the debate, all the more so because I think that I was the last Conservative candidate to be selected before the general election. I found myself unexpectedly transported from the northern hills, on which I had been walking, to my constituency. I was selected within 48 hours, and plunged straight into an election campaign.

As I listened to some of the speeches that have been made this evening—particularly that of the hon. Member for Inverness, East, Nairn and Lochaber (Mr. Stewart)—there were moments when I suddenly wished that I could be back on the train from Euston to Corroir in order to spend a few more days out on the hills rather than being in the House. I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman has now left the Chamber; he spoke of fiery crosses to celebrate the arrival of a Scottish Parliament. I do not necessarily dissociate myself from his sentiments, but I hope that, if he is lighting fiery crosses on the tops of the mountains of Lochaber, he will check first to see that I am not sleeping out there in my bivvy bag.

It is my privilege to represent Beaconsfield, a constituency which, by any standards in the United Kingdom, is itself very privileged. It has high indices of wealth, although there are areas that are impoverished and in need of help. It also has an articulate community, low unemployment and other great advantages. Those advantages do not exist because of the waving of a magic wand. They are, in part, the result of the area's location to the west of London and its proximity to centres of communication, but they are due in large measure to the industry of its inhabitants and what they have made of their communities, which are set in a pleasant and gentle landscape.

The possibilities for personal development and opportunity in Beaconsfield have meant that it is highly developed, and is often subjected to environmental pressures that need to be addressed; but it remains an extraordinarily pleasant place in which to be. During the election campaign, I found that it had a strong sense of community and participation at every level of life, not just politics.

One of the features of the campaign in Beaconsfield was the frequency with which the issues that we are now discussing came up for discussion. That was because, far from being a place of little Englanders, Beaconsfield—because of its location—has attracted people from all over the United Kingdom and, indeed, from abroad, who have settled there to lead a British way of life.

What struck me especially forcefully during the campaign was the number of people in the old people's homes that I visited who came from Wales. They had come during the depression to take the jobs that were available in the factories on the Bath road. Their experience mirrors that of my family. I need only look at the example of my forebears to see the advantages that they gained from the Union, and to realise why I am so attached to it. Four hundred years ago, they lived a life in Roxburghshire which—although it may have been romanticised by Sir Walter Scott, who included the names of his neighbours, including my forebears, in the ballads when he recreated them—was, by all accounts, not very far removed from life in Bosnia in recent years. There was political disunity; neighbour was set against neighbour because there was fear and because there were huge uncertainties.

Those problems were cured by the Union, first by the Union of the Crowns and secondly by the union of the Parliaments in the 18th century. I need only look at the way in which, by the middle of the 18th century, my family had graduated from being cattle and sheep thieves to being prosperous farmers and at the frontiers of innovation in farming methods and the agricultural revolution that underpinned the country's prosperity to know the advantages that came to them from the Union.

However, it went beyond that. When, in the following century, younger sons left the farms, they had all the opportunities offered by travelling abroad and maintaining a British identity. That enabled them to prosper—never to lose contact with their roots and their cousins north of the border, but simply to reflect the fact, as 18th-century travellers from the south of England noticed, perhaps rather to their surprise, when they crossed the border from Northumberland to Roxburghshire, that the people on each side of the border were pretty much identical.

I do not wish—especially in the light of the issues that have to be debated—to issue a panegyric on the Union. I am the first to accept that constitutions can evolve; they are not fixed. A number of ideas and innovations have been produced, not just this evening but by Ministers during discussion of the Queen's Speech, some of which I consider quite exciting.

Perhaps I might give an example of where I suspect I might be at variance with some of the views of my colleagues on the Conservative Benches, but it is a variance that I have held for a long time. The incorporation of the European convention on human rights into our national law is something that, although challenging, is nevertheless desirable if it can be done

without diminishing the sovereignty of Parliament. I believe that it can. I hope that I apply the same sorts of criteria to the proposals put forward today.

My concern is not with the principles of devolution in the sense that people may wish for it. From my frequent visits to Scotland, I am the first to accept the strength of feeling that exists there in respect of wanting devolved government. My concern is with the practicalities, and in particular with those that emerge out of the Bill that has been placed before the House tonight for its consideration. Let me try to develop that argument a little further.

I should like to take as my example the European convention on human rights. If it is to be incorporated into United Kingdom law—I do not know how it is proposed to be done—one of the articles the Government will wish to consider is article 3 in the first protocol. It states:

"The High Contracting Parties undertake to hold free elections at reasonable intervals by secret ballot under conditions which ensure the free expression of the people in the choice of the legislature."

Which people? Which legislature? I cannot go back to my constituents in Beaconsfield and simply tell them that, by diktat, they will be placed in a position in two or three years, or during the next Parliament, where, effectively, decisions that they take as to the choice of legislature will mean that there will be people legislating over them who are not themselves subject to the legislation that is passed. That fundamental flaw cannot be ignored. There is only one way in which it could be got round.

To pick up on what was said by the hon. Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) on the West Lothian question, clearly it is possible in a democracy for any amount of anomalies to exist. Anomalies, if they are tolerated, are acceptable. Imagine that the Secretary of State for Scotland had come before the House and said that as part of his proposals for the referendum he would be suggesting that people living in England should be entitled to pronounce on whether the decisions to set up a Scottish Parliament and a Welsh Assembly—I am particularly concerned about the Scottish Parliament—would naturally lead to their wanting major constitutional reforms of their own. If he had said that they should be allowed to express a view on the effective exclusion of Scottish Members from the decision-making process on English issues solely, that would be a first step towards clarifying what the different component parts of the United Kingdom want.

The issue is being fudged. I hope that the Secretary of State will accept that those of us who believe in the Union and would, if given our choice, stand forward to say that the existing arrangements have done us well and we wish them to continue, will nevertheless also accept that as democrats and believers in the popular will there is no question of standing in the way of the people of Scotland or Wales in the decisions that they wish to take. There is a right, however, to review for ourselves in England and for the people of England if they need it, such arrangements as they want. If we do not do that, the durability which must be the desired result of any constitutional change, so that it lasts much longer than a Labour Government, will be lost. What we will end up with is endless bickering, endless difficulties and endless

[Mr. Dominic Grieve]

conflict, which none of us who wish to maintain the Union and who believe in it in one form or another can possibly desire. That is why I cannot support the Bill; it has been put forward without those discussions having taken place and without the arguments being offered.

If, as one may expect, the Bill goes through after tomorrow, I hope that, nevertheless, the points that I have raised will not be ignored, but will be revived again and again during discussion of the issue. If they are, it may even be possible that we will emerge with something which is the product of the endeavour of Labour Members, but nevertheless finds itself endurable by—and acceptable to—far more people. If that does not happen, we face grave difficulties.

When it comes to the debate on the incorporation of the European convention on human rights, I certainly intend to pursue how article 3 and a number of others appear to be at variance with the structures that the Government appear to want to foist on the different components of the United Kingdom. It is an interesting discussion which I look forward to pursuing.

There were a number of things that I wanted to say before I concluded. It is customary to pay tribute to one's predecessor. In my circumstances, my good fortune was the result of difficult decisions for him and great unhappiness. I am bound to say that, during all the time I campaigned in Beaconsfield, I was made aware by those from all parties, irrespective of how they voted in the election or in previous ones, how much they recognised his concern for local issues and his assiduousness as a local Member. I pay tribute to his work because over 15 years Tim Smith did a great deal.

There is one final matter that I should like to raise. Before I came to the House to make this speech I looked at what my predecessors had said in their maiden speeches. I was amused to discover that no one had made a maiden speech as Member for the area that I represent since 1945, because they had all been elected elsewhere first. When one comes to consider the state of the parties, I was greatly reassured that, in 1945, my predecessor in south Buckinghamshire, where I still enjoy a majority of 13,500, was Labour. We are not quite gone yet.

Unable to find much comfort from that, I went back to the maiden speech made by my father in 1964. It concerned a foreign affairs issue. He was concerned that the then Labour Government had imposed tariffs which the previous Government had said, according to international treaty, they would not impose. They were aimed at restricting the import of goods from the European Community. He believed passionately—and still believes passionately—in the underlying philosophical principles of co-operation among European states. The whole of that speech was laced with his objections to the creation of structures that interfered with harmony and intercourse between people.

What worries me about the Bill is that I fear that it will do exactly the same at United Kingdom level. That is why I will support the reasoned amendment tabled by my right hon. and hon. Friends and why I cannot support the Government motion. However, if constructive suggestions are put forward as to how the problems associated with devolution for the totality of the United Kingdom can be

properly debated, I for one will be delighted to participate because the Union and the individuality in it is the absolute bedrock on which our freedom has been built.

8.38 pm

Mr. Rhodri Morgan (Cardiff, West): I congratulate the hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve)—I believe that that was a maiden speech. I have lost count of the number of maiden speeches that there have been—I think that there must have been seven or eight, mostly from Scottish Members. It made me think of my maiden speech 10 years ago. When I made it, the words "zero-zero option" had only one meaning: the way in which the super-powers tried to bargain away different categories of nuclear missiles. The words zero-zero option have a new meaning: the pickle that the Tory party has got itself into in Scotland and Wales.

One of the purposes of the debate has perhaps been to help the Tory party to work out why it has got into this zero-zero option problem in Scotland and Wales. By and large, it is because the Tory party is resistant to change and simply refuses to re-examine itself and to find out whether it should—we see it again in the amendment that it has tabled tonight—still be resisting change. It reminds me of the little signs that I see on buses sometimes when I try to pay for a ticket, or of signs in vending machine arcades saying, "This machine gives no change." That is not a bad description of the Tory party's attitude on constitutional matters.

I think that the hon. Member for Beaconsfield mentioned what had happened with the Union of the Crown in 1603 and with the Act of Union in 1707 with Scotland. At the Welsh Conservative party conference only a few brief months ago—it seems a long time ago now—the former Prime Minister referred to 1,000 years of British history, revealing that perhaps he had not got much further than the O-level stage in history, because there is no such thing. The hon. Member for Beaconsfield referred indirectly to the fact that the use of the term "Britain" and the use of the term "United Kingdom" do not go back more than 400 years. They go back in fact to the Union of the Crown with Scotland.

We in Wales would obviously tend to want to take our version of parliamentary history back another 60 or 70 years to the two Welsh Acts of Union of 1535 and 1542, but I do not want to get into 1,000 years or even 400 years of history. It is fair to say, however, that it has been interesting to see how, in most of the past 400 years, the relationship between England, given its overwhelming size within today's United Kingdom, and the three Celtic fringe countries or nations—whatever we want to call them—of Scotland, Wales and Ireland has continuously been redefined. It was originally done by way of expansion through the incorporation of Wales, the Union with Scotland and the Act of Union (Ireland) Act 1800, but since then it has tended the other way. That meant the granting of additional rights to Ireland, Scotland and Wales in different forms.

Since 1800, each of those additional rights has always been resisted by the Conservative party. It always gave out the same message and we are hearing it time and again tonight—any change to our constitution is a threat to the very existence of the Union. We have heard that such a change weakens and undermines the Union. "I am a passionate supporter of the Union," say Conservative

Members, as though it were a monopoly of the Conservative party. All they are saying is that they do not like this change.

The same arguments were used against the extension of the franchise in the 19th century and in the early part of this century. Why does the Conservative party resist constitutional change? One can understand its opposition to the extension of the franchise in the 19th century because the Tories did extremely well under the previous system. To some extent, in this century, they have done extremely well through being the party of no change. It has helped them. They would have had great difficulties getting majority democratic support in Wales and Scotland, so they thought, "The way to run it is not to grant any democratic extension of rights to Wales and Scotland."

I am afraid that the great Rubicon is upon the Conservative party, and it is beginning to divide on that issue. Certainly in Wales, we have seen at least the grandees of the Conservative party, some in the other place, some in the debate on the Queen's Speech only a few days ago, referring to the fact that a big rethink is now required by the Conservative party, and asking whether it should be resisting change and whether it was about time that it started to support the campaign through the referendum campaign and the subsequent legislation.

The official position of the Conservative party as a collective body, although that seems a bit of a misnomer at the moment, is still to resist all change. Clearly, however, there are forces splitting the Tory party into the anti-devolution, "We are still the machine that gives no change" faction and the other faction which, as we approach the beginning of the third millennium, asks what is wrong with allowing democratic devolution. Why are members of the latter faction saying that? Because they know, as we know, that, having given administrative devolution to Scotland in, I think, 1885 and to Wales in 1964 in the form of separate Secretaries and Departments of State, a crunch point is inevitably reached.

There has been administrative devolution in Scotland for more than 110 years and in Wales for 33 years. Administrative devolution poses certain problems because it means that something like the equivalent of vice-regal powers are gradually acquired. When the office of the Secretary of State for Wales was set up in 1964 under the incoming Labour Government of Harold Wilson, it was a great achievement for the Government. It started as quite a modest Ministry with some 250 civil servants and did not have a wide range of duties to perform.

Of course, almost every four or five years—or whatever the length of the Parliaments—in the 33 years since then, most of which have been under Conservative rule, at least one major issue of Government competence has been transferred from the classic British unitary state model, according to which everything is run by Departments which are held responsible at the Dispatch Box, to the alternative hybrid, the territorial mechanism according to which Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales are by and large run. Thus, all the Home Ministries have gradually been transferred to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

We are now left with this curious unitary state—yes, it is a unitary state, but one with strong elements of quasi-federal practice within it. It is still eventually responsible to this sovereign Parliament, but it is an odd system. It is not a terribly healthy one and certainly not

one that we should say is immutable because of its sheer beauty as drawn up by the brilliant Olympian minds of some constitutional lawyers. No one could say that about the hybrid system that we have now, under which England is run entirely by Departments while Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland are run on a territorial basis but with some functions such as social security and some forms of transport—air and rail—still run on a UK-wide basis.

There are slightly varying degrees of devolution in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Most notably, in Wales there has been no devolution of the Lord Chancellor's functions, Home Office functions or most transport functions.

There is thus an element of difficulty with the hybrid system, so I am very pleased that we now have a Bill that will enable the people of Wales either to veto the principles of the White Paper if they do not like them or give them the direct democratic mandate if they do. I hope that the Tory party realises that it has a choice as to whether to participate constructively or carry on as the entirely negative force that it is and has been for the past 20 years or so.

Of course, there was a faction within the Tory party whose members, some of whom are still fairly prominent but some of whom got knocked out at the election, were devolutionists in the mid-1970s vis-à-vis Scotland. However, they changed their minds when Margaret Thatcher took over the leadership of the party in the late 1970s. That was the price of preferment in the Tory party. Those who, like Malcolm Rifkind and the former Chancellor, had been devolutionists had to change their mind and become anti-devolutionists if they wanted a job in Margaret Thatcher's Administration.

At that stage, there was not a pro-devolution faction in Wales, but it would have followed as inevitably as the Secretary of State for Wales's job followed on from the original establishment of the office of Secretary of State for Scotland.

I accept what the hon. Member for Beaconsfield said about tolerating anomalies within a system so long as there is the good will to make them workable. All parties have a duty to create that good will and the atmosphere for constructive debate and interchange because we shall never get rid of those anomalies. We will never establish a perfect unitary state or attain a federal system devised by teams of constitutional lawyers—as primarily British constitutional lawyers did for the Federal Republic of Germany in the period leading up to its establishment in 1949. That will not happen, because it is not the British way. The British way is to move bit by bit, after the argy-bargy and knockabout of a general election, and after even more argy-bargy and knockabout across the Floors of this House and the other place—which, probably in the history of the world, is the greatest constitutional anomaly of all. Until now the other place has been accepted, although some changes to it may be made. Today, however, we are not debating that issue.

If we are to talk about anomalies, we must keep a sense of proportion about the different types of anomaly in the British constitution. We want—with a long, hot summer ahead of us—genuine, democratic campaigning, and we want the Tory parties to participate in it. We want them to do so, however, in a way in which they do not try to be the hold-outs, trying to claim that they are the last people who love and feel passion for the Union.

[Mr. Rhodri Morgan]

The right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard) said earlier in the debate that Conservatives are the patriots and that, collectively, they are the ones who distinguish between patriotism and parochialism. He comes from Llanelli and I come from Cardiff, and we Taffs have to stick together, but I should tell him that the implication of his statement—that Labour Members are not patriotic, because we believe in introducing democratic devolution in areas that, so far, have been only administratively devolved—will be deeply resented. He needs to rethink that attitude.

I know that the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe, because of his long period in Folkestone, has been affected more deeply than me by English folk culture. Indeed, I have been told that his favourite folk-song is, "As I was going to Widdicombe fair".

If the right hon. and learned Gentleman and other Conservative Members really love the Union, love waving the Union flag and believe that our governmental system is the strongest in the world, why do they treat the Union as a flower so fragile that even the slightest change to it will smash it—like the finest Dresden china—to smithereens? Those two beliefs cannot be held simultaneously. If one is a patriot and thinks that the British constitution is strong, the British constitution should easily be able to withstand devolution and referendums—for which today's debate is paving the way.

8.52 pm

Mr. Edward Garnier (Harborough): I congratulate my three hon. Friends—they form not a Holy Trinity, but certainly a trinity—who made their maiden speeches in this debate. They spoke with confidence and clarity, and I am sure that we all look forward to hearing more from them. I also congratulate the Labour Members who made their maiden speeches today. They all spoke with great fluency, and I hope that we shall hear more from them, too.

The hon. Member for Cardiff, West (Mr. Morgan)—in his criticisms of the Conservative party, or of what is left of it in the House and in the United Kingdom—rather reminded me of the sergeant-major who informed conscripts into the armed forces that, if they could not take the joke, they should not have joined up.

I do not think that the result of the general election was a joke, however, because I have been in the Chamber and I have listened to the debate. I have seen the size of the Labour majority—about which I do not complain unduly—and I have to accept it as a fact of political life. I have to exist as a Conservative Member in that new universe: which means that the Bill will receive its Second Reading; that it will pass, probably unamended, its Committee stage; that it will be sent to the other place; that it will return, again probably unamended, from the other place; and that, before long, it will receive Royal Assent. That is a political fact of life with which I must live.

The current facts of political life do not, however, mean that I should not contribute to the debate or that Conservative Members should not be heard. Our speeches may not change anything. Nevertheless, our job is to criticise and to oppose constructively. I hope that we will be listened to in that spirit.

The Secretary of State for Scotland accused me of being "horribly familiar". I am not quite sure whether he was criticising me for calling him "Donald", or for calling Tony "Tony", or whether he was saying that he recognised me from the previous Parliament. Whichever it was, I do not want to be rude to him, because I do not think that he was being rude to me. It would be very silly for a member of the Bar to be rude to a solicitor. All I wish the right hon. Gentleman to do is to retire soon and to spend more time with his practice so that he can benefit mine. He made a good speech and, if I may say so without ruining his reputation, he is a good man. If we have to have a Labour Secretary of State for Scotland, we could not have a better one than him.

I want to make three brief points about the Bill which may come up for discussion later in Committee. The first relates to the composition of the electorate in the referendum which is dealt with in clauses 1(3) and 2(3), the first dealing with Scotland and the second with Wales. Although I can accept the administrative convenience of translating the local government electorate into the referendum electorate, it is puzzling that that will allow non-United Kingdom citizens—non-Welshmen and non-Scotsmen—to vote on what will be a massive change in the government of the United Kingdom.

The local government electors include European Union citizens. I have no particular problem about that, because if people happen to be European Union citizens who live in the borough of such and such and pay the local council tax, they should surely be entitled to express a view politically about their local government. Where we are deciding the future, however, not just of a local government area but of the future governance of Scotland and Wales, it is surely right that only United Kingdom citizens who are resident in those countries should vote in this great thing.

I go further. Is it not all the more peculiar that European Union citizens who are not United Kingdom citizens should be able to vote in the referendums in Scotland and in Wales when United Kingdom citizens who happen to be English residents are disfranchised, despite the fact that the referendums and the devolution Bills which will follow from them will gravely affect the United Kingdom, of which my constituency is a part just as much as Welsh and Scottish constituencies are? That is a point for note now and, I hope, for greater discussion later.

I make that point not out of xenophobia, but for the reasons I expressed earlier. I look at the matter in terms of family law. Both parties to a trial separation or to a divorce—the husband and the wife—have a say in the matter. Looking at the plans for the future of the United Kingdom, it seems that only the departing parties—I know that there are discussions about whether the break-up of the Union will result from the Government's plans—will be involved. I believe that the English and those resident in England have as much right to express a view in the referendum as the Scots and the Welsh do.

My second point concerns the date. It is not yet clear—it may become clear later today or tomorrow—whether the Scottish referendum will be held earlier than the Welsh referendum. It seems a more economic use of everybody's time and possibly cheaper to hold both referendums on the same day. My suspicion—I do not know whether any Welsh Members will be able to confirm it—is that there is less enthusiasm in Wales for an Assembly than there is in Scotland for a Scots

Parliament. It may be—perhaps I am being overly suspicious—that the Government think that if the referendum result in Scotland is announced two, three, or four weeks ahead of the Welsh referendum, the impetus from that will flow across to the benefit of the Government's case in Wales. If the case for a separate Welsh Assembly and a separate Scots Parliament is good, we might as well have the argument on one day and have the result quickly and efficiently.

My third point relates to clause 4—not clause IV of fond memory for the new Labour party, but clause 4 of the Bill. It is—I freely admit it—exactly the same as clause 4 in the Referendum Act 1975 and clause 10 in the Wales Act 1978 and the Scotland Act 1978. It prevents courts from entertaining

"any proceedings for questioning the number of ballot papers counted or votes cast as certified by a Chief Counting Officer".

There will be no legal challenge to the result. That is fair enough, but what happens if the result is close or there is evidence—as there was at the recent general election—that some of the ballot papers have been improperly marked or stamped or there is some other genuine point that could be argued?

When there is a landslide result, there is clearly no point in fussing because the margin of error does not apply, but if there is a narrow result is it right for the courts to be blocked off to those with a genuine complaint? Perhaps the Attorney-General in England and Wales and the Lord Advocate in Scotland should act as a sieve to sift out frivolous applications. Bearing in mind the difficulties of establishing locus and whether it should be open only to an individual or open to groups of interested parties to raise a challenge, it might be worth while considering adding a Law Officer's function to allow legal challenges in certain circumstances.

That relates to the threshold question which has been much debated this evening. I do not want to delay the House by dealing with it further. No doubt the arguments will be addressed in Committee. Considering the result of the election, the Government should have no fears about the outcome of their proposed referendums. If they have any confidence in their case, they have nothing to fear from a threshold. If there is a low turnout—as is possible—and a modest majority in favour of or against the proposals, the perceived legitimacy of the result will be open to question. Those fears will be done away with if a threshold is included.

Finally, I congratulate the Government on the fact that the Committee stage of the Bill will be taken on the Floor of the House. That is a good move. I hope that that translates to a willingness for the Committee stage of the devolution Bills later in the year to be taken on the Floor of the House.

9.2 pm

Mr. Eric Clarke (Midlothian): I congratulate you on your new post, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and I also congratulate all those hon. Members who have made their maiden speeches. I am sure that some of my new hon. Friends will go on to better things. I also enjoyed the confidence with which hon. Members from other parties have made their speeches. I particularly liked the comments of my old friend the hon. Member for Edinburgh, West (Mr. Gorrie), with whom I worked in

the Lothian region. I do not think that he should lose any of his attitudes to this place. He has it summed up perfectly. I have not lost my attitudes either.

I have waited a long time to speak today, but I have waited a long time to speak on this issue. I am delighted that the Gracious Speech mentioned the referendum. I am also delighted to congratulate the Scottish people on getting rid of the colonial rule that we have had from St. Andrew's house. It was nothing more than people who knew better than the natives. The natives have now told them what they really think of them.

We are not quite out of the woods yet. Some hon. Members seem to be hair splitting with a laser beam, demonstrating illogical political logic and wallowing in a quagmire of red tape like big political hippos—and they love it. They enjoy tearing this good idea to bits, hiding behind the defence of being Unionists, or some other thing. Within the movement for the devolution that Scotland and Wales want are people who want the Union to remain intact—not for it to remain as it is, but for the fundamentals of being in the Union to remain intact. If they do not agree with us, the demands will continue.

The people of Scotland feel that devolution is long overdue. I have been arguing for it for many long years—as a young miner and when I worked for the National Union of Mineworkers in Scotland. On one occasion, we were sabotaged by a Mr. Cunningham. As far as I am concerned, he is persona non grata in Scotland. I hope that he never goes there again. The NUM kept the flame of freedom and democracy alight even when the rest of the Labour movement did not accept our proposals. Time and again, resolution after resolution, year in year out, we put them to Labour party conferences and to the Scottish Trades Union Congress.

The establishment of the Scottish Constitutional Convention was a great breakthrough. The STUC first attempted it in a very crude form by inviting people to discussions. Conservative Members and representatives of the Confederation of British Industry were among those who came to talk about how we could get the Scottish people what they wanted—a Parliament in Edinburgh. At the time, I was surprised when some people walked away, but now we have a convention that comprises an amalgamation of political parties, the trade union movement, the Churches and other interests. Many people kept alive their enthusiasm for a Scottish Parliament and were not too popular when they raised the matter time and again. Now we are firmly on the threshold of putting the matter to the people of Scotland and Wales.

I should like to see a Parliament in Edinburgh. I know that there are arguments about how it could be financed. There certainly would have been savings had we had a Parliament in Edinburgh. We definitely would not have had the poll tax and we undoubtedly would not have thrown away millions of pounds building a private hospital in Clydebank. Nor would we have all the quangos that were created to fuel the nepotism in the Conservative party in Scotland. We would have done away with all that and produced savings.

It has been said that a Scottish Parliament would require more civil servants. My comrade and hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff, West (Mr. Morgan) said that we were already devolving departmentally. There is already an army of civil servants in Scotland—in Dover house, St. Andrew's house and a brand new place called the

[Mr. Eric Clarke]

Quay, which is on the Forth at Leith. I do not know whether my hon. Friends on the Front Bench have been there yet, but I understand that it is quite pukka. The civil servants are already in situ; it is just a matter of organising them better and getting them involved.

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Clarke: No way. I sat here for hours listening. Had the hon. Gentleman done the same, I would have let him intervene.

A Scottish Parliament is most desirable. I support the proposed constitutional reforms. I have also always been in favour of a change in the system of voting. I should like to see new procedures, timetables and ways of conducting business in Edinburgh. I welcome the exciting prospect of creating a new forum in Edinburgh and having it run in a reasonable way, and, with all due respect to this place, without its archaic and backward procedures. I agree with the hon. Member for Edinburgh, West about that.

I remember a story, which is rather funny but contains a lesson. Back in 1974, the Monktonhall branch of the NUM held a meeting to analyse what had happened in the strike. A lot of criticism was expressed until the delegate said, "Stop! I have had enough. Yes, we made mistakes in the strike, but they were correct mistakes."

Hon. Members should not think that the House has not, through the democratic process, made some howlers and real clangers in the past. We, the Scottish people and the Welsh people, will make the mistakes—but they will be correct mistakes. I think that hon. Members know what I mean. We will not have colonial officers telling us that decisions will hurt us, they know better than us and eventually we will benefit. Those who said that they knew better than we did are getting their P45s—the lot of them. The people of Scotland know better; they are very bright and intelligent people who are not blinkered.

I say to the rest of the people in the United Kingdom, "Come and join us. You do not have to have the formula for Scotland, Wales or anywhere else. Devolve, so that democracy goes to the people and the people are involved." The people responsible will have more time and be more accountable. Those who make the decisions will not be cloistered in some room down in London, part of some big Department; they will be up front in an accessible Parliament where they can report to the people. That is what we are looking for in Scotland and that is what we will get.

I hope that people realise that, if any party or any individual in a party does not take part in the campaign for a meaningful result in the referendum, they will stand on trial. They know what will happen to them. The people of Scotland will do to them exactly what they did to the Conservatives.

9.11 pm

Mr. Lembit Öpik (Montgomeryshire): I should first congratulate all those who have made their maiden speeches before me in this debate and say how honoured I am to make mine.

As some hon. Members may have noticed, my name is not Welsh. In fact, it is not even British; it is Estonian. Both my parents left Estonia at about the time of the

second world war because of the oppression that threatened their lives. Naturally enough, they met and moved to Northern Ireland, as Estonians seem to do. I was born in Northern Ireland and that is why I sound Northern Irish rather than Estonian.

While discussing the campaign in Montgomeryshire, my agent wistfully suggested that I should change my name to Alex Carlile so that we would not have to reprint the posters. I turned down his suggestion, but over the past months I have discovered that, on the west side of my constituency, they have started calling me Llembit ap Opik. So, slowly, I am becoming Welsh.

By a remarkable coincidence, my name turns out to be an anagram of, "I like to b MP." I can only congratulate my parents on realising my future career 32 years ago. I shall be wearing my Palace of Westminster pass for another few weeks to give hon. Members an even chance of getting my name right in the Strangers Bar.

Among the political giants I follow are names such as David Davies, Clement Davies, Emylyn Hooson and, of course, my immediate predecessor, the famous and great Alex Carlile. The debt that I owe Alex Carlile cannot be put into words. It was a source of sadness to the constituency that his personal circumstances caused him to stand down, although I am sure that putting his family first was the right decision. He leaves a tremendous legacy. I hope that people across not only Montgomeryshire but the House, Britain and Northern Ireland recognise the tremendous contribution to Parliament that he has made over the past 14 years.

The same old Alex made one last appearance on Sky Television on election night. My result came in and the commentator turned to Alex and said, "So, Mr. Carlile, the Liberal Democrats hold your seat with an increased majority." He wasted no time in responding, "Yes, but the total vote has gone down!" Good old Alex. I thank him sincerely for all the help that he has given me and the Liberal Democrats over the years.

I support and applaud the proposal to have a referendum. While we may haggle about the details, no democrat—whether Liberal Democrat, Plaid Cymru, Labour or Conservative—can oppose the common sense of giving a nation the right to decide its future. The Labour proposals could be described as timid, but they are a start and it would be churlish for a political party to oppose them simply because they do not go far enough. I shall campaign for a yes vote in the referendum, along with other Liberal Democrats.

The benefits of a devolved Assembly are legion. It would see an end to the quango culture that threatens so much of what used to be under democratic control only 10 to 15 years ago. For example, the very survival of the hospitals in the Dyfed Powys area may depend on the speedy completion of the referendum; there is a sense that the quangos can no longer make crucial decisions about the future of people's health, without understanding what the people of Wales want.

A devolved Assembly will assist the future economic regeneration of Wales. The Development Board for Rural Wales has done sterling work, especially in mid-Wales, to regenerate the economy. A devolved Assembly or Sennedd could make a tremendous contribution to revitalising Wales through such agencies. It could make a start on operating more sensibly parts of the health service, such as the ambulance service. I shall not go into

details tonight, but the ambulance service has been appallingly mismanaged recently. One classic example is the famous one-person ambulance team, which prompts the obvious question, "Who carries the other end of the stretcher?" The *Shropshire Star* has run a petition to save the ailing ambulance service in the Powys area, and in two weeks it has amassed 6,500 signatures.

Devolution would bring something else that cannot be measured in numbers—a sense of responsibility. That must be worth fighting for. As everyone who has been to Wales knows, the people have a tremendous warmth and Montgomeryshire is at the heart of that feeling. Many lament the political demise of Montgomeryshire and its merger into Powys, but the spirit remains. From Llanidloes to Llanfyllin, from Welshpool and Newtown to Machynlleth, a character pervades the landscape. It is in the rocks. The *County Times*, the local paper, is more of a commentary on daily life: it is part of the community. The schools do not teach only knowledge: they teach an outlook. We nurture the River Severn to the point at which it is foolish enough to flow into England. The wages may be low but people work hard, on the land, in the shops and in the factories.

The Welsh language, despite all the efforts of previous Governments to squeeze it out of existence, is coming back. One in four people in my constituency speak it. I am learning it slowly, because I believe that if we are serious about a national identity, we have to lead from the front and prove that we mean it. I hope that in the months and years ahead, my Welsh will improve in its fluency.

The spirit of adventure in my constituency is embodied by Operation Dragonfire, about which the House will hear much more in the months to come. It is a project to build the first amateur rocket to be sent into space. The idea was hatched in the Sarn inn with the landlord, Bertie, on one especially spirited evening. Whether or not it works, we are having some tremendous evenings planning the project.

We have had problems in Montgomeryshire, including bovine spongiform encephalopathy, the crushing drop in beef and lamb prices because of the strength of the pound, low incomes, and the huge decline in public transport. The Welsh people, however, also have a self-belief. They believe that they have the right to make decisions about how they are governed, and the freedom to enjoy all the things that epitomise so distinctively life in rural Wales. There is a phrase used in mid-Wales that sums all that up: "mwynder Maldwyn," or "the gentleness of Maldwyn"—that is, of Montgomeryshire.

Our job is not simply to worship the constituencies that we represent. Our loyalty must lie not only with the people who elected us, but with the sense of justice that built the institution in which we stand today. We have a chance to honour that well, and to do so differently from the way in which things have been done in recent times.

The past of the Commons is chequered with great alliances and with appalling discord. I believe that we are now emerging from one of those periods of discord—a period marked by an extraordinary sense of self-doubt, which caused an unnatural aggressiveness on the part of the recently departed Government. When the Conservative leadership election is over, and muscle flexing is replaced by the exercise of the mind, perhaps there will even be grounds to hope for a softening of the Tory line.

We could replace the politics of confrontation with the politics of reform, through consensus and constructive opposition. The political environment that Wales, and Britain as a whole, so desperately need, is within our grasp. Our actions can restore public faith—the faith of the public in the Strangers Gallery and of those who view us at home—simply by starting to work on the merits of the issues, rather than always opposing simply because that is what we have done in the past.

It seems to me that there are some who feel more comfortable with the theatre of political war than in the assembly of co-operation—but that does not include me. My family fled tyranny in Estonia. They came to the United Kingdom for sanctuary, because it had a democratic system—a system that literally saved their lives. I am here because this democratic institution, faults and all, is truly great among the democracies of the world. The greatest reform needs to happen to this institution. The Bill will be able to change not only the details in Wales but the way in which we take part in politics in general.

I hope to play my part in the referendum, to campaign for a yes in Wales and to make a personal contribution to the great reform before us. So I return to where I started. Perhaps other Estonians, remembering the sanctuary that they, too, found, will watch my contribution and, I hope, feel that in some small way I am giving something back to the nation that gave them so much.

Perhaps above all else, I hope that as the people of Montgomeryshire and the rest of Wales watch us, not only tonight but in the months to come, they will observe a Parliament that is finally giving something back to Wales—the right to choose. If they do, and if we have the courage of our convictions, 1997 may turn out to be a vintage year—the year when the great reforms finally started, and we finally had the courage to start building a fairer Wales.

9.21 pm

Mr. Malcolm Savidge (Aberdeen, North): I begin my maiden speech by praising the maiden speech by the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire (Mr. Öpik). I do not know how eloquent he is in Welsh, but he showed incredible eloquence in English, and lucidity, too. That is especially remarkable at this time in the evening, which imposes quite a strain on those of us who have waited this long to speak.

I praise, too, the general standard of maiden speeches that have been made in the debate. They have been outstanding. Perhaps I may pay a particular tribute to my neighbour both on this Bench and in constituency terms, my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen, South (Miss Begg), for her outstanding speech.

As the new constituency of Aberdeen, North takes in more than half the old constituency that bore that name, I claim the privilege of paying a tribute to my friend Robert Hughes. He was a hard act, although an outstanding example, to follow. He was a great constituency Member, who worked hard for his constituents both individually and collectively, as well as for Aberdeen and, for north-east Scotland in general, and he won great respect both locally and nationally, across party boundaries.

In the best traditions of Members of Parliament, Robert Hughes combined being a good constituency Member with fighting for justice, freedom and peace both at home

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and abroad. He worked diligently, whether he was on the Front or the Back Benches. During his long career he spent time on both. Indeed, at one point my predecessor put his personal convictions before his personal preferment, which was a sign of great integrity—the sort of integrity that the public expect us to restore to public life in the House.

It is right to pay tribute to Bob Hughes for what he did in support of a cause that was at one time just as unpopular with some people as some of the causes for which my hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland, South (Mr. Mullin) has campaigned.

During the course of recent world history, there have been two political miracles. One is the events that we associate with Mikhail Gorbachev, the other is those that we associate with Nelson Mandela. When President Mandela made his state visit to this country, it was notable that he paid particular tribute to the part played by Bob Hughes in the abolition of apartheid. In addition, many people were deeply grateful to my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister for the tribute that he paid to Bob Hughes for that work at the last Labour party conference.

When Bob Hughes made his maiden speech in 1970, he spoke about the problem of worker migration from Aberdeen. I need hardly say that that problem was reversed because of the oil industry, as referred to by my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen, South. There are still problems in my constituency, such as youth unemployment, which will definitely benefit from the Government's job creation schemes. We must not forget that the traditional industries in my constituency, particularly the food processing industry, remain important. I believe that the food standards agency can play an important part in restoring that industry, and I praise the work that has been done by Professor Philip James and the Rowatt research institute in building up the agency. I hope that it will have a long-standing involvement in the future.

The oil industry has led to the building up of my constituency, which is continuing to grow. Eighty years ago, the present sites of many of the housing estates in my constituency were not just green-field sites—they were green fields. In my constituency, the Bridge of Don—perhaps more than any other area—has become the fastest-growing suburb and has gone beyond the level of facilities available to support it. A very exciting experiment has taken place in the Bridge of Don, where the council, the community council and the local community have worked with the relevant agencies to try to plan to solve local problems. I mention that in the context of this debate because the Government's plans will try to ensure that we have proper participatory democracy with proper subsidiarity at all levels, from international to community level.

As Bob Hughes's 27 years of service were preceded by 25 years' service by Hector Hughes, I am aware that I am breaking more than half a century of surname tradition. However, I would claim that I am not the first Savidge to come to the Westminster Parliament—although I should stress, in the non-controversial spirit of a maiden speech, that I am not referring to the public perception of Prime Minister's Question Time until this afternoon's reforms. I am half English and half Scots, and I am thinking back to the 1400s and to a Parliament—which met sometimes in

Westminster and sometimes elsewhere—in which I believe a certain Sir Arnold Savidge held the position of Speaker on at least two and possibly three occasions.

I understand that the Government of the time had three main features—the setting up of independent financial scrutiny; the pursuit of what might be called a one-nation policy—before Disraeli, let alone the present Government; and the apparent total harmony between the House of Lords and the House of Commons on policy. I should like to commend to the other place that in considering this Bill and those that we expect to come forward for the Scottish and Welsh Parliaments, it should follow that excellent example.

All parties should now be working together on this issue. Surely it should not now be a matter of controversy. All Scottish and Welsh Members of Parliament were elected on manifestos that said that there should be Parliaments in Scotland and Wales. I urge not just the Liberal Democrats but the nationalists to join us in fighting for a yes, yes vote in the referendums, and then to work constructively with us in setting up the Parliament. I shall go further and say to the rump of the Tory party that now that the people of Scotland have said to it what Cromwell said to the Rump Parliament:

"In the name of God, go!"

is it not time for Conservatives to think about Cromwell's other advice and

"think it possible you may be mistaken."?

Is it not possibly time for whoever is elected by the remnants of the English Tories as their leader—I see one contender in the Chamber—to consider that a Scottish Parliament with proportional representation could look after the interests of minority, fringe parties?

In all seriousness, I must make an appeal. Let all parties and the other place work together with us in consensus and consultation, so that we can set up a Parliament that can have the confidence and consent of the people of Scotland—government of the people of Scotland, for the people of Scotland, by the people of Scotland.

9.30 pm

The Minister for Home Affairs and Devolution, Scottish Office (Mr. Henry McLeish): I am very pleased to be at the Dispatch Box in a Labour Government. The enjoyment of victory in one's seat is one thing; the enjoyment of having a Labour Government is another, but it is an honour, a privilege and an enormous responsibility to be at the Dispatch Box.

Many hon. Members have said tonight that they seem to be the custodians of the principles and procedures of the House. Those views are shared by every hon. Member. The Government want to ensure that debates are properly scrutinised and have the maximum participation of every part of the House. That should be the case when we are dealing with serious constitutional issues.

We have experienced some wonderful maiden speeches in the first day of this two-day debate—10 at the last count, I think. I must put on record my enjoyment of listening to my hon. Friends the Members for Aberdeen, South (Miss Begg) and for Cumbernauld and Kilsyth (Ms McKenna), the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley), my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, East, Nairn and Lochaber (Mr. Stewart), the hon. Member for Edinburgh,

West (Mr. Gorrie), my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Edinburgh, Pentlands (Dr. Clark), the hon. Members for Tewkesbury (Mr. Robertson), for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve) and for Montgomeryshire (Mr. Öpik) and my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen, North (Mr. Savidge).

The quality of the contributions was of a high order. If that progresses through our debates, the House will be enriched as a consequence of the new intake. In case I am charged with being too loyal to the new recruits and less favourable to existing Members, there were also many excellent contributions from the latter on both sides of the House.

In considering this constitutional issue, Conservative Members raised two or three important points about the Union—the idea of thresholds, of pre or post-legislative referendums and whether there should be a United Kingdom electorate. I will want to deal with the latter two, but it is important to make a forcible point at the start. Our measure—the Bill, followed by a Scottish Bill and a Welsh Bill—will mean the strengthening of the Union. This is not an attempt to undermine it. Indeed, it is an opportunity to ensure that the Union is strengthened.

If the election result showed anything in Wales and in Scotland, it was that the status quo was not acknowledged or supported by the people who used their votes in the ballot. Conservative Members should appreciate that hard, crushing reality. People vote for different parties for a variety of different reasons, of course, but it would be foolish in the extreme if any hon. Member decided to ignore the realities in Scotland and Wales.

Furthermore, as regards the Scottish dimension, it is important to listen to Scottish Conservatives. There is a distinct gap between contributions to the debates in this House and what is happening throughout Scotland. In many parts of the Conservative party, there is enormous scepticism. In some parts of the Conservative party in Scotland, there is downright opposition, but party members want to engage in the debate. This is an instructive point. Conservative Members will want to acknowledge that and to contribute. The Government and Conservatives in Scotland who are involved in the debate want to strengthen the Union.

I hope that this evening we have heard many appeals to rise above party so that constitutional issues can be considered on their merits. I fully support that idea.

Mr. Swayne: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. McLeish: No—for the simple reason that many hon. Members have sat through the whole of this debate and the hon. Gentleman has not.

Mr. Swayne: I was watching it on television.

Mr. McLeish: That is not an excuse for not being in the Chamber.

Thresholds were referred to earlier and seem to be gaining favour with Conservative Members. After the referendums, the Government will act in accordance with the results, but we are seeking the electorate's view of our proposals in principle. Unlike in 1979, the referendums are not technical measures. Any threshold, other than a simple majority, would be arbitrary and unfair on the

people of Scotland and Wales. We want to hear the views of those people, and a simple majority vote will send a clear enough message to us.

Fancy franchises, as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland said, are not needed. Their only purpose would be to frustrate the democratic will of the people. Conservative Members should think long and hard about that.

There is a sense of history in the making in Scotland and, I hope, in the House. There is a sense of occasion as we look towards getting into the details of major constitutional change after the general election of 1 May. There is a sense of anticipation as we enter, in my judgment, the most exciting period in Scottish and Welsh politics for 50 years.

We are embarking on a journey that will end with the opening of a Parliament in Scotland and an Assembly in Wales. Surely we are embracing this evening the sense of history and passion that has driven home rule discussions throughout this century.

There is a mood for change, and momentum is building up; for far too long in Scotland and Wales confidence has been undermined by the Conservatives, expectations have been diminished, horizons narrowed and ambitions frustrated. After 50 years of debate in the United Kingdom that has ebbed and flowed in passion, importance and parliamentary time allotted, we have a unique opportunity to move forward and decide our future.

Mr. Dalyell: My hon. Friend mentioned both history and details. I warn him, in the friendliest way possible, that in all the discussion the devil is often in the detail. For example, my hon. Friend the Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Mr. Rowlands) asked about the civil service. I am not asking for an immediate answer, but the position of the civil service has to be sorted out: is it responsible to a Scottish Parliament; is it part of the British civil service; or is the United Kingdom civil service to be broken up? There are endless problems of that kind.

Mr. McLeish: I respect my hon. Friend's comments. There will be challenges, as well as the devil, in the detail. We will have published a detailed White Paper before the summer recess that will be the basis for our discussions and for those in Scotland.

It is important to press ahead with the Bill, which will give the people of Scotland and Wales the opportunity to voice their views on our proposals for devolution. We should re-emphasise the principle of asking the people concerned to vote on both propositions in Scotland and on the one proposition in Wales. It is a chance to choose: surely hon. Members would not want to deny the electorates in both those countries that opportunity.

Earlier this month, the people of the United Kingdom elected a Government committed to introducing a comprehensive programme for constitutional renewal. Elements of the programme included the incorporation into UK law of the European convention on human rights; the introduction of a freedom of information Bill; the reform of the House of Lords; and the modernisation of the procedures of the House of Commons.

Taken together, that adds up to the most wide-ranging programme for constitutional reform that has been envisaged in modern times. Its purpose is to modernise the institutions of government to meet the needs of the people and the demands of the 21st century.

[Mr. McLeish]

At the heart of this programme, and its vanguard, are our plans for a Scottish Parliament and a Welsh Assembly. Tomorrow, my Welsh colleagues will go into more detail about the Welsh aspects of the legislation. The people of Scotland have made it abundantly clear, not just in the general election earlier this month but over the preceding decade, that they want more control over their own affairs and to remain within the United Kingdom. Our plans to establish a Scottish Parliament with law-making powers, firmly based on the agreement reached in the Scottish Constitutional Convention, will achieve that.

We have not been slow to put words into action. I am grateful for the allusion of my hon. Friend the Member for Dundee, East (Mr. McAllion) to that. Two weeks after coming into office, we have already taken the first steps towards meeting our manifesto commitment on a Scottish Parliament. Last Thursday saw the introduction into this House of legislation to allow the people of Scotland to vote in a referendum on our proposals, which will be set out in a White Paper that will be published well ahead of the referendum, and in any case before the House rises. We expect the referendum to be held by early autumn. On the basis of what we expect to be a resounding popular endorsement of our plans, we shall then bring forward legislation to create the Scottish Parliament.

There will, of course, be a full opportunity for Parliament to debate our proposals during the passage of the main devolution Bill. Once that legislation is enacted, we shall immediately set in hand the necessary preparations to establish a Scottish Parliament.

Scotland therefore now stands on the threshold. Too long have the people of Scotland waited for their wish for a greater say in their own affairs to be realised. We are about to take another step in what has been a historic journey in the government of Scotland. That journey started almost 300 years ago.

The Acts of Union of 1707 abolished the Scottish and English Parliaments and established in their place a Parliament of Great Britain. It was an incorporating union, but the Acts none the less allowed Scotland to retain many of its distinctive features. The position of the Scottish established Church, the continuing autonomy of Scots law and our legal system, the organisation of local government, and our distinctive education system were maintained.

Since the Acts of Union, Scottish autonomy within the Union has continued to develop. During the second half of the 19th century, interest in constitutional change was stimulated by debate on home rule for Ireland. In 1885, the Secretaryship for Scotland and the Scottish Office were established, and the following year saw the establishment of the Scottish Home Rule Association, with the object of winning a measure of devolution for Scotland. Scottish home rule Bills were introduced in Parliament in the 1920s, and in 1926 the Scottish Secretary became a full Secretary of State.

The 1920s and 1930s saw an upsurge in popular demand for home rule in Scotland, and in 1942 the Scottish Union, later renamed the Scottish Convention, was formed. The convention secured a wide measure of popular support through a covenant, which committed its signatories to do everything in their power

"to secure for Scotland a Parliament with adequate legislative authority in Scotland's affairs".

In a short space of time, about half the adult population of Scotland signed the document, and the people's views were an important element in the appointment in 1952 of the royal commission on Scottish affairs.

As a further response to the home rule movement in the first half of the century, in 1941 the then Secretary of State allowed meetings of the Scottish Grand Committee to be held in Scotland. At the same time various Scottish Departments were established and in this century there has been a steady transfer of functions to the Scottish Office.

It is important to have set out the evolution of the devolution of power and responsibility to Scotland. Looked at incrementally, we are building on a tremendous sense of history, of tradition and of improving the government of Scotland. We have to view further progress in that context.

Mr. Salmond: I am grateful to the Minister of State for going over the history. He mentioned the evolution of devolution. Does he remember a cartoon by Ewan Bain, a famous Scottish cartoonist, suggesting that the difference between the two concepts was that devolution took longer?

Mr. McLeish: It may have taken longer but the important historical reality is that we are about to deliver a Scottish Parliament, and my colleagues a Welsh Assembly.

All those developments, and more, have taken place in the context of a strengthening Scottish autonomy within the Union. I reinforce that point because Conservative Members made so many comments about the future of the Union.

We now stand ready to take another step in this unfinished journey. We are committed to maintaining the Union and committed to delivering devolution to the people of Scotland, and we shall not fail them. Our plan of action, which I have just spelt out, will deliver a robust, effective and durable Parliament quickly and effectively. We are working hard to put together the terms of our White Paper, which will set out plans for the Parliament. We have the benefit of the work of the Scottish Constitutional Convention, which has helped to produce cross-party consensus, which is so vital. There is consensus on the case for change and on the basis on which change should be made. Our proposals will be firmly based on that consensus.

The terms of the White Paper will take into account contributions that have been made over the past few months and, indeed, years, by a wide range of academics, constitutional specialists and other interested parties. We are listening and learning against the background of comments made in the House and elsewhere. If we are to take the matter seriously, we must recognise what others are saying about the passage of the Bill. When we reach the substantive Scotland Bill, the same process and courtesies will be extended.

To supplement the listening-and-learning process, I shall be holding a series of further meetings with key players such as the Scottish Constitutional Convention, the constitution unit, the Scottish Trades Union Congress, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and the Confederation of British Industry, along with many other similar bodies. I am keen to listen to their views on how we should firm up our proposals.

We are confident that, given the extent of the dialogue that has already taken place and will take place over the next few weeks and months, our proposals will reflect and deliver the ambitions of the people of Scotland for a Parliament of their own. The publication of our White Paper will take the debate on our proposals for devolution from the minds of the few into the hearts of the many. That is an important step that the House can take by passing referendum legislation following a national campaign.

We have, of course, been here before, as we have been constantly reminded this evening by hon. Members on both sides of the House. In the 1970s, the Labour Government struggled to legislate for a Scottish Assembly, but—essentially because of that Government's lack of a working majority in the House—the process was protracted. That legislation was burdened by amendment after amendment during its parliamentary passage. The Bill was enacted. In a subsequent referendum, however, the majority vote in favour did not reach the 40 per cent. threshold that was required by an amendment agreed to during the Bill's passage through Parliament.

We have learnt two important lessons. First, there is the need to secure the passage of legislation by asking the people of Scotland for a specific mandate to establish a Scottish Parliament, including defined and limited financial powers to vary tax. We believe that the referendum will achieve that. Secondly, there is the need to have the details of our plans settled in advance, rather than their continuing to be developed during the passage of legislation. The White Paper that we shall publish will, I believe, achieve that objective.

We have, I think, learnt a third lesson. It was hard at the time to recognise it, but it is absolutely right to remember it now. The lesson is that a simple majority will suffice. We cannot see obstacles being placed in the path of the Scots and the Welsh making decisions about their own future. This is a chance for change, and it is also about consent and choice.

I am not sure that anyone could argue against the proposal upon which the perspective is based. In his winding-up speech on Second Reading on the Scotland Bill in November 1977, the late John Smith said:

"If we pass this Second Reading and move on through the week to take other decisions connected with it, we shall not only improve and strengthen government in Scotland. We shall do a great deal to enhance and revive the unity of the United Kingdom."—[*Official Report*, 14 November 1977: Vol. 937, c.108.]

There is no more eloquent testament to our plans and ideas than to state again the late John Smith's comments in this place. Our plans are all about improving the government of Scotland while at the same time strengthening the unity of the United Kingdom. That is a powerful message for the House to be sending to every part of the United Kingdom.

Mr. Grieve: I recognise from what has been said that the proposals are sincerely desired by many hon. Members, but when will the knock-on effects on the people of England in respect of English-only legislation be addressed? At what point in the discussion will that

happen? Will it happen before the referendum, so that people in Scotland can understand what the impact is likely to be? Will it happen afterwards, or not at all?

Mr. McLeish: The hon. Gentleman asks a fair question. We intend to have the maximum debate in Scotland, in Wales and, indeed, in the House, which is representative of the whole United Kingdom.

In the context of what was said earlier by the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard), it is important to note that—if we are talking about the Parliament deciding—this Parliament will decide. Scots and Welsh people will be directly affected by the legislation, and we think it right that the pre-legislation referendum should take place there; but every right hon. and hon. Member from every part of the United Kingdom will participate in discussions on the White Paper, and in debates in the Committee stage of the Bill that we are now discussing, as well as debates on the substantive Scotland Bill, on Second Reading, in Committee, on Report and on Third Reading. There will be ample opportunity to ensure that every Member of Parliament's voice is heard. That, I think, is a fair answer to what I consider a serious question.

It is clear from the path of history that I have described, from the late 19th century to the efforts of John Smith, that considerable progress has been made, but there is still a great deal of unfinished business. The Government are determined to finish it by taking the next step, and the Bill paves the way for that step. It offers a chance for choice, a chance for consent and a chance for change. It is about giving the people of Scotland the democratic right to choose to take another step in the history of the government of Scotland. The chance to debate our detailed proposals will come later. There is no reason for us to deny the Scottish people the opportunity to choose their own destiny.

Mr. Lansley: When he expands on the detail of his proposals, will the Minister explain how he proposes to give a voice to the many Scots and Welsh people who are not resident in Scotland or Wales, but who feel deeply about constitutional change affecting their place of birth, the place of their previous residence or the place of their possible future residence?

Mr. McLeish: I hope that every right hon. and hon. Member will feel passionately about the future of the United Kingdom, the future of Scotland and the future of Wales. This is not an exercise in exclusion; it is an exercise in inclusion. The hon. Gentleman will represent a significant number of constituents who will want to have a say. Our parliamentary democracy, however, is founded on representation, and it seems to me self-evident that, at each stage of this Bill and the substantive Bill, we shall have every opportunity to debate the concerns that the hon. Gentleman has outlined, in a representative way.

Mr. Salmond: The hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley) said that people whose future place of residence would be affected should be entitled to vote. Theoretically, anyone in the world could in future reside in Scotland.

Mr. Home Robertson: The hon. Gentleman means Sean Connery.

Mr. Salmond: That is quite likely.

[Mr. Salmond]

Does the Minister have a view on this? According to the Conservative party, it seems that anyone in the world should be able to vote in the referendums in Scotland and Wales.

Mr. McLeish: Like the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Mr. Salmond), I take pride in my country, and would extend a generous welcome to everyone in the world. The other side of the argument of the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire, however, is that we are somehow trying to close down the franchise. We are trying to provide the most important franchise, which is residency, and we are taking the local government base as our model. I think that that answers the question.

Mr. O'Neill: Does my hon. Friend think that we might well have been able to accommodate some of those considerations if the Bill had extended further, and had included provisions for parts of England and, perhaps, Northern Ireland where it was felt desirable to have some form of devolved government or assembly? Could those people not have been accommodated, perhaps by a statutory instrument? That would have changed the character and speed of legislation. It would also have meant that the high priority that our Government are now giving to devolution for Scotland and Wales would have been, in some respects, subsumed by decentralisation of the rest of the United Kingdom, no matter how desirable it is. That would have met the concerns of the other parts of the United Kingdom, but it would have altered the picture of our ambitions for a decentralised state in the United Kingdom.

Mr. McLeish: I suspect that my hon. Friend is inviting me on a much longer journey than I intend to take tonight.

I should like briefly to comment on the important issue of the referendum and how we, the Government, are attempting to reach out. My hon. Friend the Member for Dundee, East has spoken about consensus. We think that there should be maximum consensus in relation to constitutional change. That is why the inclusive approach that we have adopted is important. We believe that we need to extend the scope of that consensus.

I should like to return to my earlier point about the two debates that now occupy the minds of the Conservative party in the United Kingdom. We have a debate at Westminster, which is reflected in the remarks made in particular by the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague), which suggests that in a real sense the Scottish Conservative party simply does not exist. Far be it from me to try to reach out over the heads of the leadership of the Conservative party to the Conservatives, but it is salutary to remember that, apart from the debate here, there is a healthier debate going on in Scotland. The six Conservative leadership contenders would be advised to listen a bit more and lecture a bit less until they are sure of their ground.

If we are seeking consensus on a serious measure, it is important for Conservative Members to appreciate that, although they may have lost Conservative seats in

Scotland, in terms of parliamentary representation there are still half a million Conservative voters there who want constructive leadership that reflects the reality and not what that leadership would have liked it to have been if the circumstances had been different on 1 May.

Another consideration relating to the extension of the consensus is how inclusive our campaign should be. The referendum is vital if it is about giving choice to Scots. We need a healthy contribution not only from the Conservatives but from the nationalists. I am slightly encouraged to note from speeches made tonight that the nationalists are having a debate within their own party. [Interruption.] Again, my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil (Mr. O'Neill) is inviting me to be less charitable than I am attempting to be. It is vital that that encouraging debate within the nationalist party should continue.

This Second Reading debate should be sending a powerful message to every Scot, every voter, every political party, every supporter of a political party, every member of a political party, every organisation and every village, town and city that this is an enormous issue for the future of Scotland. It must be taken seriously. History will judge harshly anyone from any organisation who does not embrace and grasp the importance of what we are doing.

After the Bill has gone through the House and we have had an opportunity to put it before the Scottish people, Scots are expecting a serious mood to descend on political parties and others. It is hugely encouraging to note that certain organisations in Scotland are already seeking to rise above party in many respects by trying to reach out in the manner that we have described tonight.

It is important to mention the minds of the few and the hearts of the many. The campaign is finished and perhaps the soundbites will cease, but I am sure that there is no better subject to which one could apply such theory than devolution. There is a powerful sentiment for change in Scotland. Yes, we must discuss the issue and become involved in what for some people has become the theology of devolution, but we have a responsibility to ensure that the success of any measure that we pass should be assessed only according to its impact on ordinary people, whether in Scotland or in Wales. If we are inclusive in our approach and consensual in our attempt to take the matter forward, and if we try to generate a serious debate, especially among Conservative party members in the country and Conservative Members in the House, we will be doing everyone a favour.

This is about empowerment, enrichment and the sense of history. That is the context of it. The history of this honourable place is surely the background for us to be raising the level of the debate. We should not get involved in some of the nit-picking exercises that were prevalent in some hon. Members' speeches; hon. Members on both sides of the House owe it to themselves, to their constituents and to the whole of the United Kingdom to ensure that this debate is conducted seriously.

It being Ten o'clock, the debate stood adjourned.

Debate to be resumed tomorrow.

Whipps Cross Hospital

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—[Mr. Jon Owen Jones.]

10 pm

Mr. Harry Cohen (Leyton and Wanstead): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Minister on his appointment. I know that he has considerable abilities and his appointment is well deserved, but he is in a tough job, especially after 18 years of damage to our health service by the Tories. I wish him success. I also congratulate you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and thank Madam Speaker for granting me this debate.

In the election, the most common complaint raised by my constituents was: "Do something about Whipps Cross." [Interruption.]

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order. Would hon. Members leave quietly? An hon. Member is addressing the House.

Mr. Cohen: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Seven to eight-hour waits in the accident and emergency department are commonplace, with regular reports of 24-hour and longer waits. The impression is that Whipps Cross resembles a war zone, and that local people fear going there. My mailbag bulges with complaints confirming the findings of a table showing that Whipps Cross was second in the whole country for complaints; last year, there were 1,170 complaints.

Local newspapers regularly catalogue the dismal stories of long waits in the A and E department for patients on trolleys in corridors. For elderly people, left without regular nourishment, medical or nursing attention, physical deterioration is rapid, with the risk of pressure sores. There should be fast-track admission for elderly patients directly referred to the hospital by their general practitioner. They should not be repeatedly queuing for admission. [Interruption.]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Berrow) had better be silent. I have heard some comments from Opposition Benches. He is in an Adjournment debate on an important matter.

Mr. Cohen: There has recently been the tragic death of 11-year-old Neil Askew from meningitis. Among the many unsatisfactory aspects surrounding his death is the suspicion that, if he had not endured a wait of many hours before his condition was identified, and if he had been transferred to the specialist hospital more quickly, his life might have been saved.

I draw the Minister's attention in particular to the long waits for treatment, especially on trolleys, that were particularly bad last winter. To prevent a recurrence, I ask him to accept that action needs to be taken before next winter.

In addition to the unacceptably high level of complaints, two separate performance indicators point to persistent chronic under-performance at Whipps Cross. The Government's official national health service performance guide, analysed by *The Guardian* on 3 July

last year, showed Whipps Cross second from bottom of all acute hospitals in England. Most recently, the Audit Commission report said:

"Waiting times are a serious problem at Whipps Cross Hospital, and are the result of a combination of factors. In addition to the increasing workload and inadequate staffing levels, a shortage of specialty beds and problems with current admission policies need to be addressed."

The report found that Whipps had the worst waiting times out of the 17 London and south-east accident and emergency departments that it examined.

Those three indicators show that Whipps Cross is not delivering the same quality services as comparable hospitals elsewhere. That is unfair to local people. Waiting lists for hospital treatment have slipped back to 18 months, and a recent trust report shows that they will slip further. Staff tell me that some patients are actually being kept off the waiting lists. About 14,000 people are waiting for non-emergency operations.

The community health council said:

"Health services in Waltham Forest are worse than in other areas."

For example, elderly patients currently have to wait six to nine months for a hearing aid as priority is given to the dying and the over-90s.

Some of the elderly acute wards are in a dreadful state without adequate toilet and washing facilities. The majority of those who die do so in ordinary wards, where the level of palliative care is inadequate.

Whipps Cross hospital is in deep financial crisis. Forest Healthcare NHS trust and Redbridge and Waltham Forest health authority, which are responsible for that, are in a financial mess. On 7 May, a report on the deficit said that the

"health authority is in a position where it has an underlying recurrent deficit of £3 million ... It could be exposed to a £6.5 million deficit".

The trust overspent by about £4 million.

On top of that, a £10 million reduction to Redbridge and Waltham Forest is proposed in the latest unfair funding formula adopted under the Tories. Last week's *Wanstead and Woodford Guardian* and *Waltham Forest Guardian* reported a "£20 million black hole" in health finances, quoting David Avis, the health authority's director of finance. The *Ilford Recorder* lists £13.1 million of debts on the health authority's loans.

I and fellow Members of Parliament for the area, some of whom wish to catch your eye, Mr. Deputy Speaker, have met local health officials month after month and year after year, only to be told that things are under control and getting better. Only Nick Leeson could believe that.

The management is in a state of permanent crisis. The top managers are not on top of the situation, and are disinclined to take responsibility. Middle managers struggle to cope with costly, repeated reorganisations. Some staff have had to apply three times in three years for their own jobs. Expensive outside consultants have been used, but their recommendations have not always been implemented, and then new consultants are appointed.

The trade union talks of "destabilisation" of the work force, which puts the blame on the staff who have left and creates a climate of fear so that employees cannot speak their mind. The hospital staff, to whom I pay tribute for keeping the service going in awful circumstances, have been treated unfairly. Their morale is at rock bottom.

[Mr. Cohen]

The privatisation contract with Tarmac Servicemaster, for cleaning, portering, transport and switchboard services, has been disastrous. There has been a failure properly to appreciate basic hospital hygiene. For example, initially one mop was used to clean toilets, wards, treatment rooms, sluices and kitchens—what a risk of cross-infection and MRSA, or methicillin-resistant staphylococcus aureus. This is the madness of privatisation, which ends up costing a lot more. I have photographs to pass to the Minister showing the shambles of that contract.

New Labour's election promise was that the internal market will go and that 100,000 more patients will be treated by cutting £100 million from the bureaucracy budget. We will also act on the scandal of long waits on trolleys. From the case that I have outlined, I am sure that the Minister will agree that Whipps Cross sorely needs the benefit of that programme.

There are huge funding deficits in the health authorities and trusts across London. I ask the Minister to re-examine swiftly the capitation formula, of which a quarter is not weighted for deprivation. A full weighting for deprivation is recommended by the Select Committee on Health, and by the King's Fund. Out of 402 boroughs, Waltham Forest is 23rd from the bottom and Redbridge is in the bottom third, according to the Jarman indicators of deprivation.

The health authority and the trust have adopted a joint strategic change programme with transitional funding of £4.4 million, dependent on cash efficiency savings of £3.7 million being achieved. Because of the scale of the deficit, however, the programme will simply spread the debts and cuts over a number of years. As the Audit Commission confirmed, new disinvestments—many of which are desperately short-term—will exacerbate the appalling problem of delays in the accident and emergency ward.

A recent trust report on acute services recommended a reduction of 183 posts and 27 beds, and downsizing theatre sessions by 10 per cent. On 7 May, Lister ward—the female surgical ward—closed, despite the trust's assurances in April to the *Waltham Forest Guardian* that no changes would be made in the 1997-98 financial year. Cost-effective programmes, such as interim care, have been abandoned, and have resulted in higher readmission levels. Quality of care, best practice and good ideas have been jeopardised.

Currently available money could be better spent, and wasteful spending on inefficient private contractors and consultants must be ended. The joint strategic change programme must be drastically improved, because it is currently the only game in town. The local health authority and trust managements have failed to take effective action and assume responsibility for the various on-going crises and for the overall crisis.

Department of Health monitoring and support is necessary. I ask the Minister to scrutinise and reorganise the structure and personnel of the trust and the health authority. There should be local authority staff representation.

The health authority and the trust have failed to agree on this year's contracts, in which there is a £6.5 million gap. Redbridge and Waltham Forest health authority costs more than £4.8 million per annum, primarily in managing

the internal market. That sum could be slimmed down considerably, in line with Labour policy. Management of patient care is our primary objective.

Help is also required in recruiting key staff—particularly A and E consultants, nurses and midwives—to work at Whipps Cross hospital. The Government could play a role in reshaping funding, and in encouraging staff to go where they are most needed.

I am confident that the Minister agrees that there must be widespread and sustained improvement at Whipps Cross hospital. Its users—my constituents—deserve better, and I am sure that they will benefit from Labour's new health policies.

10.12 pm

Mr. Mike Gapes (Ilford, South): I welcome you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to your new position. I am also very grateful to have an opportunity to say something about Whipps Cross hospital, because many of my constituents depend on it for services in some specialisms.

Over the past five years, some of my constituents have waited 30 hours in hospital, and others have had operations cancelled several times. It is quite clear, however, that the situation facing both trusts—Forest Healthcare NHS trust, at Whipps Cross hospital; and Redbridge Healthcare NHS trust, at King George hospital, which is in my constituency and within the Redbridge and Waltham Forest health authority area—is now very serious.

My hon. Friend the Member for Leyton and Wanstead (Mr. Cohen) mentioned last week's reports in the local press. The *Ilford Recorder* reported a £13 million deficit, and explained the implications of that deficit for waiting times, cancelled operations and care for local people. It is perhaps ironic—given the leadership of Redbridge and Waltham Forest health authority—that, immediately after the general election, the authority announced that it had a problem and that it could not set a budget for this year until July, thereby deferring everything for two months.

It is interesting that the authority's management did not reveal the problem in April, or in any of the many meetings that we have had with them in recent months and years. They told us that everything was under control, and that any problems were completely the fault of the hospitals' inefficiencies.

The problems are deep-seated, and they need radical solutions—one of which will be to restructure the health authority and to clean out many of the people working for it, so that we can replace them with people who are more responsive to local communities and to the needs of my constituents and those of my hon. Friend the Member for Leyton and Wanstead.

I hope that, when he replies, the Minister will recognise the wider issues that threaten our part of north-east London, one of which is the potential knock-on consequences for Whipps Cross and King George of the closure of the accident and emergency unit at Oldchurch hospital. I believe that all those issues are linked, and that it will be disastrous for us all if the Tory closure programme for London hospitals continues. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Leyton and Wanstead for allowing me to make this contribution.

10.14 pm

Mr. Neil Gerrard (Walthamstow): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Leyton and Wanstead (Mr. Cohen) for allowing me to take part briefly in this debate.

I have no doubt that my hon. Friend the Minister will hear from many hon. Members throughout the country about problems in their local hospitals. It is, however, important to emphasise that I and all the Members of Parliament for the area around Whipps Cross—this is true irrespective of party—believe that there are particular problems in this trust and this district health authority.

I do not trust the league tables we have had over the past few years. They measure things that are measured easily, such as how long people wait before their name and address are taken in accident and emergency. On that basis, Whipps Cross meets the patients charter standard, although we know that there are immense waiting times. What the tables do not, of course, measure is quality of outcome, and there are many concerns about Whipps Cross in those terms. Whatever the league tables measure, there is something wrong when a hospital is at the bottom of every league table except the league table of complaints, in which it is up at the top.

My hon. Friends the Members for Ilford, South (Mr. Gapes) and for Leyton and Wanstead have mentioned the problem of the budget being deferred and of the deficit, so I do not want to go over that point. One of the most important points, however, for Members of Parliament has been the difficulty we have all had in trying to establish exactly what is going on. As a result of the internal market, the trust and the district health authority blame one another, and, from one meeting to the next, it is extremely difficult to pin down what has happened to the budget. Horrendous figures suddenly appear about which we have not been told before.

There is a strong case for looking at the question of openness—at the way in which budgets are decided, when they are decided and how open that process is. There is no doubt about what is happening to services, irrespective of the true figures for the deficit.

I know that the trust has historical problems. The original application for the trust to be set up was a disgrace. With such financial information, it would have been impossible to borrow anything from a bank, yet, on the basis of that totally inadequate information, a large chunk of national health service assets was handed over to the trust. I also believe that creating a trust covering not just a hospital but all the services in the area was a big mistake. All that is history, but it has left the present management, who are making serious efforts to address the problems, with an impossible job.

I ask the Minister, when he looks at solutions for the hospital and at the review of the health service in London, to consider special assistance, particularly special management assistance, for trusts that are having such problems.

I heard yesterday that my hon. Friend the Minister for School Standards has decided that one of the schools in the Waltham Forest area should be on the list of those that are to be the subject of special measures. For most of my constituents, putting Whipps Cross hospital rather than a very small school on such a list would be of far greater interest. We need to consider how we can take hold of hospitals, trusts and district health authorities that

are clearly failing their communities, and do something to turn them around. On that there would be unanimous support from local Members of Parliament.

10.19 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. Alan Milburn): It is a pleasure to reply to the debate, and to congratulate you, somewhat belatedly, on taking up your new post, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Leyton and Wanstead (Mr. Cohen) for his kind remarks, and the courteous way in which he presented his concerns. I know that he takes a keen interest in local health service issues, and that he and my other hon. Friends who have spoken this evening have some pressing concerns about the state of the NHS in their part of London.

What I have heard this evening is saddening, but perhaps not surprising. It shows how much needs to be done to rebuild the health service in this city and throughout the country. I was particularly pleased to hear my hon. Friend's positive comments about the service provided by the dedicated staff who work so hard at Whipps Cross hospital. The problems faced by the local health service are no reflection on such people, who work tirelessly to provide patient care.

Whipps Cross is not alone in facing such difficulties. I know from the discussion that I have had with many colleagues during my brief time as a Minister that such problems are repeated all too often in hospitals up and down the country. The legacy that we inherit is profoundly challenging.

As my hon. Friend took us through the litany of problems at Whipps Cross, I was struck by two trends in his remarks: the unnecessary pain and suffering caused to vulnerable individuals by problems in the national health service, and the extent to which improving the situation finds common ground with our manifesto commitments for restoring our national health service and the work that we have already started to put things right.

I appreciate my hon. Friend's serious concern about the financial plight of Forest Healthcare NHS trust. Despite the staffing reductions that he described, and other measures to contain costs and improve efficiency, it is a real concern that the trust is ending the financial year 1996-97 with a forecast £4.4 million deficit. Of equal concern is the continuing gap between the trust and the health authority in the current financial year.

A joint strategic change programme has been agreed between the trust and the health authority to redress the deficit over two years. The plan includes further efficiencies and cost reductions, but it is not all bad news. For example, there are programmes in place to improve accident and emergency services by recruiting additional consultants. Plans are in train to deal with the frail elderly population when they enter hospital. I hope that my hon. Friend will welcome those developments.

The quality and timeliness of the care delivered to patients are crucial. I hope that my hon. Friend will take some reassurance from the fact that improvements in

[Mr. Alan Milburn]

patient quality standards are a declared principle of the Government—a principle shared with the programme being implemented by the trust. I shall ensure that the NHS executive monitors progress on the programme extremely carefully.

Mr. Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green): I apologise to the hon. Member for Leyton and Wanstead (Mr. Cohen), but I should like to make a very brief intervention on a non-party political basis as one of the Members for the area who uses Whipps Cross hospital.

I associate myself with the request of the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Mr. Gerrard) that the executive examine the problem. Before the election, I had conversations with the Minister's predecessor about this. If he could ensure that and publish the results, at least to establish some confidence locally that things are being done, it would help tremendously to improve relations with local people.

Mr. Milburn: The hon. Gentleman raises a pressing point about local confidence. As my hon. Friend the Member for Leyton and Wanstead made clear, there are many real concerns in the community, particularly after what happened last winter. I intend to keep a close eye on developments, particularly the implementation of the change programme which I shall ask the NHS executive to undertake on my behalf.

I understand that financial management has been a weakness within the trust. I hope that it is now being addressed seriously by the new director of finance, who was appointed about eight months ago.

A major challenge for Forest Healthcare, and for the NHS, is to meet the demand for emergency care, while at the same time reducing waiting lists for planned operations. At times, Whipps Cross was stretched to the limit last winter, as my hon. Friend graphically illustrated.

I appreciate the call from various quarters, including from my hon. Friend this evening, for additional resources to meet the growing demands and expectations at Whipps Cross and other hospitals. Frankly, had money not been squandered on bureaucracy and the internal market, we would not be in this position. Inevitably, it will take time for the resources to be released as we undo the damage, but in due course there will be more money for front-line patient care.

In the meantime, Forest Healthcare has established a major project to improve its ability to respond to the pressures of next winter. It has also confirmed that meeting the demand for emergency care remains a top priority, and it continues to negotiate with Redbridge and Waltham Forest health authority about the funding required to reduce waiting lists.

I give hon. Members on both sides of the House an undertaking that I shall keep a very close eye on developments. I hope to see satisfactory plans in place before too long to avoid the problems faced by patients last winter.

More generally, the key to rebuilding the health service is not another wholesale reform, which is the last thing the NHS needs, but taking positive, progressive steps towards ending the absurd internal market that we have put up with for far too long. We are already taking action on bureaucracy, fair waiting and ending the endless paperchase. We must make sure that a greater proportion of every pound spent on the national health service goes towards patient care rather than bureaucracy. We shall also be looking at the distribution of resources to ensure that they fully reflect local population needs and operate as fairly as possible.

I know that my hon. Friend's health authority has some concerns about the weighted capitation formula. It feels strongly that, compared with some other authorities, it is not fairly funded for the services it has to provide, when variations in local pay and prices are taken into account.

The work that the authority is putting in hand to grapple with this issue may well be useful within our overall aim of ensuring a fair and equitable distribution of resources throughout the NHS. I am sure that my hon. Friend will encourage the authority to work alongside the NHS executive in that endeavour.

In conclusion, through no fault of the doctors, nurses and other staff at Whipps Cross, who are as dedicated and devoted as everyone else who works in the NHS, the service provided by the hospital does not always live up to the standards we had in mind when we set up the NHS almost 50 years ago.

We are in the process of restoring the NHS. The problems at Whipps Cross so eloquently described by my hon. Friends speak volumes about the state of the NHS and of other hospitals in the city of London and elsewhere in the country. I assure my hon. Friends the Members for Ilford, South (Mr. Gapes) and for Walthamstow (Mr. Gerrard) that we shall release details of our planned review of London's health services in due course. We shall certainly look into the concerns that they have expressed this evening.

The changes that we intend to make to the health service will be properly thought through and tested, and will be introduced sensitively. They will ensure that hospitals such as Whipps Cross will be able to provide a proper health care service in tune with our founding principles for the NHS.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at twenty-nine minutes past Ten o'clock.

House of Commons

Thursday 22 May 1997

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Nursery Vouchers

1. **Mrs. Organ:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the nursery voucher scheme. [188]

The Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Mr. David Blunkett): We have done an assessment and have found that the bureaucratic and administrative costs of the voucher scheme are unacceptable, that the loss of places in the voluntary sector and the closure of private providers are unacceptable and that, therefore, the voucher scheme urgently needs review.

Mrs. Organ: I offer my congratulations to my right hon. Friend on his appointment. I thank him for his reply. It has, indeed, been a damaging scheme. It has caused early years education providers in the Forest of Dean huge amounts of unnecessary work, while not extending provision, and it has caused the closure of an excellent playgroup in Churcham. What assurances can my hon. Friend give parents and providers in England that we will soon be rid of the scheme?

Mr. Blunkett: I am happy to tell my hon. Friend that the voucher scheme will end as from the end of the summer term this year. The ill-conceived scheme will be set aside in favour of a new start for early years education based on a partnership between the voluntary, private and education authority sectors, which will work together to draw up development plans at local level and to ensure that, instead of bureaucracy, we can provide free places for all four-year-olds and eventually for all three-year-olds as well. The money will be ring-fenced; that provision will be based on the development plans put to the Department so that we can establish early years forums in which all people can play their part in fulfilling their pledge to give children free places rather than a paper promise.

Mrs. Gillian Shephard: I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman and his team on their new positions. I hope that they enjoy their work at the Department for Education and Employment.

The right hon. Gentleman will know by now through departmental briefing that the administrative costs of the nursery voucher scheme amount to just £5 million. Would he like to tell the House how many places for four-year-olds that sum will deliver and how soon and how far it will take the right hon. Gentleman towards the guarantee of a place for all 600,000 four-year-olds?

Mr. Blunkett: I thank the right hon. Lady for her normal courtesy and welcome her back to the Commons. I hope that I can return the courtesy that she paid me—*[Interruption.]* Which she did.

The voucher scheme's bureaucracy is more than simply the £5 million to which the right hon. Lady referred. The £3 million alone that went on advertising the scheme has already been spent, but the new money that was allocated and will be applied directly to the provision of free places is available to us. Therefore, from September we hope to make substantial progress towards the guarantee that we have given, on which the previous Prime Minister reneged, of a free place for all four-year-olds.

Dr. George Turner: I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State on his appointment and on his statement to the House today. I am sure that he will be well aware that the people of Norfolk who participated in the piloting of the nursery scheme will be highly delighted to see it abandoned. As the former chair of the education committee in Norfolk, I know that, although some good was done, the special circumstances meant that there was considerable waste. Will my right hon. Friend please repeat today the promise that he has made in the past to ensure that the people of Norfolk are not put at any disadvantage because they participated in the piloting of the scheme?

Mr. Blunkett: I am delighted to give my hon. Friend the assurance that all existing places will be safeguarded so that those who have redeemed vouchers will be able to carry them through into the autumn where places exist this summer, as part of the new partnership with the voluntary and private sector. What is more, we will start the process of piloting early years centres to draw together nursery education and early years care and ensure that parents are involved in the process of family learning.

Grant-maintained Schools

2. **Mr. Brady:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when he will approve outstanding applications for grant-maintained status. [191]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Ms Estelle Morris): Outstanding applications for grant-maintained status will be considered on their individual merits and will be decided as soon as possible.

Mr. Brady: Will the hon. Lady guarantee that the grant-maintained schools that are currently in place and those that are due to be approved will continue to be free to set their own admissions policy?

Ms Morris: We are keen to raise standards for everyone, and the key to that is to put aside the arguments on structure and begin to look at what goes on in the

classroom in terms of the quality of teaching and learning. We can guarantee that all schools will flourish under Labour under the new partnership that we have set out in our document.

No good school has any need to fear Labour's proposals. I can tell grant-maintained schools and those currently in the local authority sector that we will work with them to raise standards for the children they serve.

Mr. Miller: Will my hon. Friend congratulate the parents of Meadow County primary school in my constituency who, in the heat of the general election campaign, decided by two votes to one against going grant-maintained? Will she encourage those few governors who are still trying to fight a rearguard action against the democratic wishes of the majority of the parents to realise that their efforts will be wasted?

Ms Morris: I am happy to congratulate my hon. Friend's school on the good quality of education that it provides for the pupils whom it serves. I hope that the school will now concentrate, as it no doubt has done in the past, on standards and put behind it the divisiveness that is a feature of many grant-maintained school ballots.

Sir Peter Emery: Does the hon. Lady understand that her statement is already hollow, because the Government have closed Mount St. Mary's school in Exeter? The previous Secretary of State pledged that it would be given grant-maintained status, but that is now being refused by the current Minister's colleagues. That means that the letter sent to parents which stated that there would be places for all children at the school is completely false. Today, parents have been approaching me and my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) as they try to find places for their children. When will the Labour party realise that closing good schools is a falsehood?

Ms Morris: I fear that the right hon. Gentleman is misguided in his comments; if he consults his right hon. Friend the former Secretary of State for Education and Employment, he will be told that no decision was given on the school to which he referred.

I should like to reiterate my main answer that every application for grant-maintained status will be decided on its merits. The right hon. Gentleman referred to the statement made yesterday and he will be aware that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State also announced that grant-maintained status would be given to Westoning school in Bedfordshire. We are absolutely intent on judging the merits of a case when deciding on the future status of schools.

Education Authorities (Emergency Finance)

3. **Mr. Mitchell:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what proposals he has for providing emergency finance for education authorities to prevent any increase in class sizes in the current year. [192]

The Minister for School Standards (Mr. Stephen Byers): We have no such proposals. The funding that schools receive this year has been based on decisions made by the previous Administration. However, we shall

introduce a Bill later today that will lead to a reduction in class size for every five, six and seven-year-old in the country.

Mr. Mitchell: I congratulate my hon. Friend on his appointment.

Given his visit to Grimsby during the election campaign, he will know that a Labour local authority, North East Lincolnshire, which attaches the highest priority to education, as the Government do, has been forced to cut spending on education, with the result that we will lose 100 teachers by September. We already have 196 primary classes with more than 30 pupils and that number will now increase. Such class sizes arise directly from the underfunding of the unitary authorities by the previous Administration.

Will my hon. Friend open discussions with his colleagues at the Departments of the Environment, Transport and the Regions on what can be done about that underfunding? Will he meet a deputation from North East Lincolnshire to see what can be done to stop further cuts in education?

Mr. Byers: I can give my hon. Friend two assurances. First, I would be more than willing to meet a deputation led by him and including representatives from North East Lincolnshire. Secondly, there is no doubt that particular difficulties are being experienced by unitary authorities. We have begun a review of the education element of the standard spending assessment, to ensure that the distribution of that grant is far fairer than it was under the previous Administration. I am confident that, in the process of doing that, we will be able to offer some hope to unitary authorities such as North East Lincolnshire.

Mr. Don Foster: I welcome the Minister to his first outing at the Dispatch Box. I reiterate my congratulations to him and the rest of his team.

Does the hon. Gentleman acknowledge that the reply he has just given offers no hope to schools throughout the country? Will not class sizes continue to increase this year as teachers continue to lose their jobs? Does the Minister further acknowledge that, as the Chancellor of the Exchequer has announced clearly in the House that it is the Government's intention to stick to departmental control limits for at least the next two years, he is offering no hope to schools for the next two or three years?

Will the hon. Gentleman reflect on the strange anomaly of the Government's amazing hyperactivity with regard to legislation and changes to the Bank of England, while there is a total lack of any promise to provide more resources to schools?

Mr. Byers: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his initial comments. He has rehearsed an argument put to the British people in the run-up to the general election on 1 May. The British people spoke on that day. We have made education our No. 1 priority—which is why, 21 days after polling day, we have announced the abolition of the nursery voucher scheme and why today we are introducing a Bill to reduce class sizes. This Government are taking positive action to benefit all our children, rather than using warm words which would do nothing to help them.

Kate Hoey: I welcome my hon. Friend to his new position. I thank him and his team for sending help squads

into two schools in my constituency. I know that that will be welcomed by the parents, the pupils and all those involved in the schools.

I understand that class size is a problem, but in my borough an even bigger problem is the number of young people—more than 300—who are out of school, playing truant or excluded, but who do not have any opportunity to get any help. Even at this stage, the local authority is closing the Orchard centre. Do the Government have any plans to do something about providing out-of-school places for those children, who are becoming totally involved in crime and therefore contributing to the huge amount of crime in the area?

Mr. Byers: I thank my hon. Friend for her initial comments. When I meet Lambeth local education authority in the next two weeks to discuss the question of failing schools within that authority, I will also raise the issue of children who are disenchanted with the education currently offered to them.

The Government have made a commitment to offer education to all our children. No child should be excluded. In particular, we are looking at the ways in which finance from the lottery can be used to help the sort of young people to whom my hon. Friend referred.

Mrs. Gillian Shephard: What contribution to a reduction in class sizes in grant-maintained schools will be made by the Minister's proposal to remove 10 per cent. of their funding?

Mr. Byers: I am afraid that the right hon. Lady is wrong about our policy. There is no commitment to reduce by 10 per cent. the delegation of funding to grant-maintained schools. When we publish our White Paper in June, she will find our proposals for that specific area very informative.

It ill becomes a former Secretary of State for Education and Employment to talk about increasing class sizes when, under her Administration, an additional 115,000 children under seven were in classes of more than 30. That is the right hon. Lady's record. She did nothing to deal with the problem. Today, after just 21 days in office, this Government are introducing a Bill to resolve that problem.

Age Discrimination

4. **Mr. Winnick:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement about Government policy on legislation to combat age discrimination in employment. [193]

The Minister for Employment and Disability Rights (Mr. Andrew Smith): The Government are strongly opposed to age discrimination at work. We shall be consulting widely to obtain a consensus on how we can best proceed to achieve that.

Mr. Winnick: I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his appointment. As there is no age discrimination in this place—there are hon. Members of 24 years of age and upwards, and I shall not mention my own age—why should age discrimination be allowed to continue? It undoubtedly causes much hardship among those in their

40s and early 50s who find tremendous difficulties in getting another job and are discriminated against simply because of their age. As we promised legislation and I introduced a private Member's Bill which was wrecked by the Opposition, would my right hon. Friend agree that a law should now be passed in much the same way as we legislated against discrimination on grounds of race, gender and disability?

Mr. Smith: My hon. Friend is right to say that discrimination on the ground of age must be ended, and he is right to say that the role of legislation must be examined. I pay tribute to the efforts that he has made and the energy he has expended on campaigning to end discrimination on the ground of age. Before we proceed to legislate, we shall need to consult interested parties, groups that would be affected, including those representing elderly people, employers and those with expertise such as my hon. Friend. We strongly believe that age discrimination is wrong, and we shall implement proposals to stop it, with the support, I hope, of the vast majority of hon. Members.

Mr. Ian Bruce: I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on his appointment to the Front Bench and on his rapid reversal of the Labour Government's pledge to legislate. I warn him that the legislative route, while seeming attractive, has many pitfalls. Someone has to be 21 years of age to enter the House, but that age limit would be illegal under such legislation, as might requiring people to retire at 65. I urge the right hon. Gentleman genuinely to consult rather than to go straight ahead with the proposals of the hon. Member for Walsall, North (Mr. Winnick).

Mr. Smith: We certainly shall consult. I thank the hon. Gentleman for his congratulations. He is right to say that the subject involves many complexities, but there were complexities relating to legislation against racial and sexual discrimination—arguments similar to those that he advanced were used against such legislation. The fact that the matter is complex is an argument for careful consideration and consultation, but it is not an argument for doing nothing.

International Labour Organisation

5. **Mr. MacShane:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what steps he is taking to support the work of the International Labour Organisation. [194]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Mr. Alan Howarth): My right hon. Friend the Minister of State will be representing the United Kingdom at the annual ILO conference next month. We shall give the ILO full support for its activities, particularly its promotion of international labour standards and human rights.

Mr. MacShane: I congratulate my hon. Friend on his appointment as Minister and on his election as Member of Parliament for the great steel-producing town of Newport. You and I, Madam Speaker, who have held only one party card in our lives, will know how difficult it is to switch to another party. After the putsch by the

old Etonians and anti-Europeans of the 1922 Committee yesterday, may I invite the remaining one-nation and pro-European Tories to come across and join us before it is too late?

I welcome my hon. Friend's strong statement in favour of the ILO, particularly as only two years ago the Conservative party, when in government, sought to take Britain out of it. It now needs a British-led agenda on employability, not over-regulation. We need a strong ministerial presence in the ILO. Britain has not had that presence in recent years: such a presence will give the ILO new leadership from a new Government—leadership which it needs and to which he and other Ministers can contribute.

Hon. Members: Answer.

Mr. Howarth: With friends such as my hon. Friend, it is so much easier. Of course the United Kingdom should support the International Labour Organisation, whose aims are to encourage productive employment and to improve standards and conditions of work worldwide.

Mr. Forth: Rubbish.

Mr. Howarth: The hon. Gentleman says that is rubbish, but he will now have plenty of time on his hands to reconsider the simple view that deregulation to the ultimate degree, a cult of low pay and the absence of employee rights lead to some sort of economic nirvana. That view has been extensively disproved in the Conservative experiment of recent years, in which the poor and the unemployed in this country have been the victims.

Youth Training

6. **Mr. Llwyd:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what proposals he has for increasing opportunities for training for people between 16 and 20 years of age; and if he will make a statement. [195]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Dr. Kim Howells): We have a wide range of proposals for improving young people's participation in high-quality education and training. In England, as in Wales, the Government will take these forward in a positive and open manner.

Mr. Llwyd: I congratulate the Minister on his appointment and wish him well in post. Obviously, it should be a priority to get youngsters back into work, and one avenue for doing so is through high-quality training. May I remind the Minister that there are some places in Wales where youth unemployment is as high as 33 per cent? May I therefore urge on him the need for quick and telling action in this particular field?

Dr. Howells: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind remarks. I am very much aware of the problems of youth unemployment, especially in his constituency, which suffered the closure of the Trawsfynydd nuclear power station and a number of other staple employers in the area. Under our new deal arrangements, we shall put 13,000 young people either to work in the voluntary sector or

into high-quality training and education opportunities; and we shall make sure that the problems he has outlined will be addressed very quickly. I know that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales is well aware of the situation in the hon. Gentleman's constituency, and he has told me himself that he will pay special attention to it very quickly.

Mr. Barry Jones: After such welcome training, does my hon. Friend believe that there is a real chance under his policies of future jobs in manufacturing?

Dr. Howells: In Wales, we have been fortunate in attracting a great deal of inward investment, especially in the manufacturing sector. That is due mainly to the setting up of the Welsh Development Agency, which Labour set up and which the Tories opposed right from the beginning. We recognise that, in order for us to take that forward, to attract more investment and to do something that the last Government were incapable of doing—grow indigenous industry in Wales—the next tranche of investment will go to the best trained, best educated work force, and that is what we aim to create.

Mr. Paice: I add my congratulations to the hon. Gentleman on his assumption of his new responsibilities. His and the Labour party's determination to reduce unemployment among young people is an entirely admirable aim; however, when he spends the money from the windfall tax, how many real jobs will that create? How many other people will lose their jobs because of job substitution? How many of those young people will end up back on the dole, because the voluntary force that he has decided on will not create a single job?

Dr. Howells: It is rather ripe for former Tory Ministers to get up and talk about people going back on the dole, after the carnage that they created in constituencies like mine over many years, when unemployment rose to more than 3 million and probably to more than 4 million. I will tell you this—

Madam Speaker: Order. This is not an election campaign.

Dr. Howells: I beg your pardon, Madam Speaker—I forgot myself for a moment.

I tell the hon. Gentleman this: we shall not allow people to languish on the dole; we shall use the windfall tax to get young people off the dole and back into work. That is the whole idea of it; if the hon. Gentleman has not grasped that yet, he had better do so soon, because it is going to happen.

School Buildings

7. **Mr. Baker:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what steps he intends to take to allow local authorities greater freedom to tackle the backlog of repairs to school buildings. [196]

Mr. Blunkett: We greatly sympathise with the position in which schools and colleges throughout the country find themselves, with a legacy of more than £3 billion of disrepair. Shortly we shall make proposals for a

public-private partnership, based on a consortium of local education authorities, schools and financial institutions, which will free the money to tackle that backlog and ensure that our teachers and pupils have an environment fit to work in.

Mr. Baker: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer. Is he aware that he has inherited a terrible situation from the previous, Conservative, Government, in that one in five secondary schools and one in seven primary schools have substandard accommodation? In my constituency, Lewes, at Wivelsfield primary school, more than 60 per cent. of children are in so-called temporary buildings—ramshackle buildings that have been up for more than 10 years. Will the Secretary of State acknowledge that reliance on public-private projects alone will not necessarily produce the answer? Can he estimate the likely value of private finance initiative projects to repair crumbling buildings in the next 12 months?

Mr. Blunkett: I agree with the first part of the question. There is a chronic situation in schools throughout the country, with leaking roofs, window frames that do not fit, temporary classrooms that have been temporary for the best part of 40 or 50 years and remaining outside toilets. We are determined to tackle that backlog and that legacy. We shall have a considered programme, which we shall want to discuss with the local authorities and the financial institutions. I of course accept that that will not be the sole answer to the question; we must apply existing capital resources and permission to borrow sensitively and carefully, to ensure that, together, the partnership and the borrowing requirement enable us to tackle that backlog during the present Parliament.

Mr. McNamara: Is my right hon. Friend aware that the second part of his answer today—PFI plus borrowing requirement—is an essential part of the attempt to solve that problem? It is a particular problem for flat-top schools built in the 1960s and 1970s and it is a considerable problem for schools in the voluntary sector. Will he ensure that representatives of the voluntary sector are included in any decisions?

Mr. Blunkett: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that issue. The flat roofs that exist throughout the country are a bit like the flat earth policy of the Conservative party—it has many leaks in it and consequently requires urgent repair. The need for repair exists regardless of the status of school or its category in terms of aid, and we shall discuss, with the Churches and others, ways in which they might join the partnership and work with us to tackle that backlog of disrepair.

Sir Patrick Cormack: How does the right hon. Gentleman propose to tackle authorities like Islington, which, whatever the date of their buildings, provide a lamentable education?

Mr. Blunkett: After 18 years of Conservative rule—*[Interruption.]* After 18 years of Conservative rule at national level, the hon. Gentleman will be aware that, in the first three weeks in government, we have acted decisively where failure exists to ensure that every child in every school—in Islington and elsewhere—receives the standard and quality of education that we would expect for our own children.

Assisted Places Scheme

8. Ms Jane Griffiths: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how much money will be available for reducing class sizes through the phasing out of the assisted places scheme. [197]

Mr. Blunkett: One hundred and eighty million pounds will be available over time as a result of the phasing out of the assisted places scheme, which is in the forward public expenditure survey predictions inherited from the previous Government, £100 million of which will be available by the year 2000 to be used to reduce class sizes and fulfil our pledge.

Ms Griffiths: Does the Secretary of State agree that his reply represents tremendously good news for schools throughout the country—*[Laughter.]*—not least for schools in Reading, East, the constituency that I represent? Redlands county primary school in Reading now has two reception classes where it had three, and five-year-olds are being taught in classes of 36 and 37.

Mr. Blunkett: I agree entirely with my hon. Friend and congratulate her on her question. One can see why Conservative Members are so depleted—they laugh at the prospect of £100 million being spent in the next three years on reducing class sizes which, under their regime, went up in the primary sector by a staggering 40 per cent. in terms of those taught in classes of more than 30. It is a measure of the despair of Conservative Members that they think it is funny that children are taught in large classes.

Mr. David Heath: We welcome any additional money for schools, but will the Secretary of State explain how a substantial reduction in class sizes will take place in Somerset if his right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister and Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions imposes the iniquitous Conservative capping proposals on the county and 90 teachers are sacked?

Mr. Blunkett: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that my party made no promises that we could not fulfil. I have stated clearly what the situation will be for the current financial year and we intend to treat all local authorities with fairness. Each of them knew what the situation was and, regrettably, will have to plan on a budget that was not of our making and in circumstances which we hope to reverse during the lifetime of this Parliament.

Mr. Grocott: Does my right hon. Friend remember being told ad nauseam by the previous Government that, contrary to the common sense of most of the people of this country and to the views of parents everywhere, the size of classes in schools was of no importance? If any civil servants in his Department still give advice to that effect, will he send them away on a retraining course—preferably in small groups?

Mr. Blunkett: I can confirm to my hon. Friend that we are strongly in favour of small groups of people concentrating their minds on the agenda of the new Government, rather than that of the old. I can also confirm

that class sizes make a difference, and that is why some people choose to spend a great deal of their own money on buying smaller class sizes in the private sector.

Mrs. Gillan: I would like a direct answer to a direct question. Some 36,000 of our brightest children will be robbed by this Government of a future assisted place scheme. What will it cost to educate those children back in the state sector?

Mr. Blunkett: I can promise the hon. Lady one thing—there will be a great deal more straight talking and straight answers from this Government than there ever was when she and her colleagues answered questions. The assisted places scheme was not geared to the brightest in the country—the brightest in the country exist in all schools and deserve a good education. There is a profound difference in values between the parties.

We do not believe that we should abandon the state education system, nor do we believe that it is inherently so poor that we have to allow—in the words of the former Deputy Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Henley (Mr. Heseltine)—children to escape from it. We believe in investing to ensure that all children have an opportunity to experience the highest standards of education from the time that they enter school, so that not 36,000 but 7 million children benefit from the education system.

Information Technology

9. Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what proposals he has to extend the use of information technology in higher education. [198]

Dr. Howells: We shall be looking to the Dearing inquiry to take into account the new possibilities opened up by information technology in its recommendations on the future development and delivery of higher education.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: May I welcome my hon. Friend to his post? I hope that, within the Department for which he has responsibility, there is appreciation of the original thinking that he will bring to its work. Is not the reality that any growth in higher education in the United Kingdom will not now come by way of expanding existing single-site universities, but by developing information technology in higher education and distance learning in the way that—I might say modestly—I suggested in my proposals for a university of the lakes two years ago? What is the Government's position on the matter?

Dr. Howells: I recall the impressive report which my hon. Friend circulated on the university of the lakes and on the state of higher and further education in Cumbria. I hope that we can now revisit it, because he is right about the need for new approaches to the delivery of education at all levels, especially further and higher education. He will understand, however, that we cannot comment specifically on any project, given that Sir Ron Dearing's inquiry will soon report to the House.

Mr. Boswell: Although I welcome the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues to the Front Bench and, even in respect of this question, welcome some aspects of their answers,

does he agree that information technology should be the practice of all engaged in higher education, including the humanities and more obvious subjects? Will he undertake to take a sympathetic line, subject to the Dearing recommendations, in respect of access and outreach, with particular reference to remote rural areas?

Dr. Howells: I should like to agree with everything that the hon. Gentleman said. The opportunity now available for the delivery of higher and further education, especially to remote rural areas, is tremendous. The sooner we get on with it, the better.

Schools (Quality Assurance)

10. Mr. Connarty: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what policies his Department is considering to ensure that quality assurance is focused more on children within schools than between schools. [199]

Ms Estelle Morris: The Government's overriding priority is to raise standards of achievement for every pupil, hence the clear targets that we have set for improvements in literacy and numeracy. However, we shall achieve those targets only if the weakest schools improve to the level of the better schools.

Mr. Connarty: I welcome my hon. Friend on her appointment from the chalk face to ministerial office and, at the same time, welcome the Government's special measures action recovery team to deal with failing schools and to help them to succeed, underlining that everything about this team is SMART. Does my hon. Friend share the concerns expressed that under the previous Government judgments on failing schools were made too late? Does she accept that local authorities' quality assurance processes and schools' internal quality assurance systems must be strengthened to deal with problems in schools?

Ms Morris: I thank my hon. Friend for his kind comments and for welcoming the SMART programme. He is absolutely right. This week, the Government took action in respect of 18 schools that had been failing pupils for at least 18 months. The previous Government had taken no action to ensure that those schools improved. We should aim to have no schools failing pupils and to identify problems before that happens so that improvements can be made. One of the problems with the system has always been that, whereas an external inspection system can identify weaknesses, there has been no programme of support for schools that are in that position. That is exactly the area with which we wish to deal in the forthcoming months.

Mr. John M. Taylor: Are not parents—and tax payers, too, for that matter—entitled to know about the relative performance of different schools? I accept that it may be uncomfortable for a school to come low in a league table, but at least it is identified as being in need of some assistance.

Ms Morris: The hon. Gentleman is right. All parents have the right to know how their children perform, whether they are reaching the targets rightly set for them and how the school is performing. Parents also want to

know that, if there are problems in the school and the school is not achieving at the level expected, action will be taken. That key element has been missing from the system so far. We have made it clear that we will not accept failure in any school, no matter where it is. All the partners in the education service—school governing bodies, local authorities, central Government and parents—must now accept their responsibility for ensuring that we raise standards for all children in our schools.

Mr. Steinberg: I congratulate my hon. Friend on her appointment, which she fully deserves. However, why was it necessary to publish the names of those failing schools? I am all in favour of help being given to failing schools but I cannot understand why those schools' names had to be published because it decreases the teachers' morale and I do not believe that it is necessary.

Ms Morris: I thank my hon. Friend for his kind comments and note the "however" that followed thereafter. It will have come as no news to anyone in the communities served by the schools that their school was failing. Parents, head teachers, governors and local authorities will have known for at least 18 months and, in some cases, for as long as two years, that their school was not up to scratch so the public airing of the school's name was not new.

It is important to state that that gave a clear message from the new Government that we will not tolerate failure. Not only that, but where schools are not delivering the goods, we will accept our responsibility to support them in raising standards. I know that my hon. Friend will welcome the fact that this Government offered help to the schools that are struggling, and did not just criticise them. A task force will go in to help, and I hope that many of the schools will take up our offer of an experienced adviser to help them tackle the problems that they face.

Grant Maintained Schools Foundation

11. Sir David Madel: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what are his reasons for proposing to abolish the Grant Maintained Schools Foundation. [200]

Mr. Byers: The Grant Maintained Schools Foundation is a private company and its future is a matter for its directors.

Sir David Madel: Subject to parental support, do grant-maintained schools have a permanent place in the education service?

Mr. Byers: We made it clear in the run-up to the general election that we want to introduce a new structure into our school system, under which all schools will be treated fairly. A White Paper will be published in June which will give effect to those proposals. The Government's priority, however, is not to concentrate on structures, as did the previous Administration, which gave £2.5 million of taxpayers' money to the Grant Maintained Schools Foundation—enough to pay the salaries of 100 primary school teachers. Our priority is to ensure that we improve the standards and quality of education that we offer to all our children.

Educational Scholarships

12. Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what is his Department's policy towards educational scholarships. [201]

Ms Estelle Morris: Scholarships are a matter for those organisations that award them.

Mr. Chope: I thank the hon. Lady for that helpful reply. Will she join me in congratulating Charles Mannon, the candidate that the Labour party put up in the Christchurch constituency in the general election, on the exemplary conduct that he displayed during the campaign? Does she agree that Mr. Mannon, who was educated at a public school with the benefit of an assisted place, is a supreme example of the value of the assisted places scheme, and of educational state scholarships?

Ms Morris: I am happy to join the hon. Gentleman in congratulating Mr. Mannon on his behaviour during the general election campaign. I am only sorry that I cannot congratulate him on being in the House today. The Government are far more intent on the educational future of the children who are now at school than we are on the educational past of Labour party candidates.

Youth Unemployment

13. Miss Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what estimate he has made of the number of young people who have been unemployed for over six months who will be helped off welfare and into work. [202]

Mr. Andrew Smith: At present there are 178,000 people aged between 18 and 24 who have been claimants, unemployed for longer than six months. In addition, on current trends, we envisage that each month around 25,000 young people reach the six-months threshold. The Government's commitment is to get 250,000 young people off benefits and into work.

Miss King: I thank my hon. Friend for his reply, which is most welcome. Nowhere is that news more urgently needed than in my constituency, Bethnal Green and Bow. Is my hon. Friend aware that my constituency has the highest number of under-25s in Britain, and also one of the highest levels of youth unemployment, with more than one quarter of the unemployed being under 25? The situation is particularly bad for the ethnic minority community: 36 per cent. of Afro-Caribbeans and 48 per cent. of the Bangladeshi community are suffering from unemployment. Does my hon. Friend agree, therefore, that Bethnal Green and Bow in particular, and east London in general should receive immediate assistance from the scheme?

Mr. Smith: I congratulate my hon. Friend on her question and the passion with which she rightly speaks about the needs of the young unemployed in her constituency. We shall carry forward the programme with jobs with private sector employers, work with the voluntary sector, places on the environmental task force and the option of full-time education and training to address basic skill needs. We shall carry the programme forward as quickly as possible to ensure that my hon. Friend's

constituents and others who are unemployed get the help that they need, which they have been denied for far too long, so that they can make the most of their potential.

Mr. Nicholls: No one would doubt the hon. Gentleman's commitment to helping the young unemployed—a commitment that is shared on both sides of the House. However, his problem is that, on the one hand, he has that aspiration and, on the other, his party is committed to a national minimum wage that will destroy low-paid jobs. All experience shows that the low-paid jobs often sought by the unemployed will disappear first. Does the hon. Gentleman feel comfortable with that?

Mr. Smith: Experience from elsewhere—including the United States, which has implemented the minimum wage—shows that it does no such thing: it is perfectly consistent with increasing the number of people in employment. If the hon. Gentleman genuinely shares our concern for the unemployed and our commitment to providing opportunities for them, he would listen to the electorate and what the people said in the recent general election campaign and get behind our drive to get people off welfare and into work.

Sixth Form Colleges

14. Mr. Viggers: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement about the operation of the system of the sixth form colleges. [203]

Dr. Howells: The 109 sixth form colleges in England make a vital contribution to the education and training of our young people. The Government are determined that sixth form colleges shall continue to flourish.

Mr. Viggers: Does the Minister agree that the sixth form sector has been extremely successful in making efficiency gains? What extra efficiency gains does the Minister think that the sector is capable of making? Can he assure the House that, whatever demands are made upon the sector, the Government will provide the funding?

Dr. Howells: We are aware of the efficiency gains that have been made in sixth form colleges, and of the increasing co-operation between those colleges and other further education institutions. We shall ensure that those efficiency gains continue, and that there is adequate provision for decent education through both sixth form colleges and colleges of further education.

Mr. Tipping: Can the Minister confirm that he has taken urgent steps to fill the funding gap left for sixth form colleges and for the further education sector generally as a result of the withdrawal of the demand-led element? Is it not right that colleges should meet the commitments that they entered into by September?

Dr. Howells: I confirm that the Government have no intention of renegeing on the financial arrangements made by the previous Government amid the shambles of the demand-led funding element. We shall ensure that the contracts that have been entered into are maintained.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: Does the Minister anticipate any end to the efficiency gains that can be made by sixth form colleges and colleges of further education?

Dr. Howells: There are many opportunities for continuing efficiency gains, not least of which is the

proper application of information technology and other new technologies for education. I am looking forward to future gains and to better quality education all round.

Grant-maintained Schools

15. Sir Richard Body: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what proportion of the sums that will be taken from grant-maintained schools under his proposals will be delegated directly to schools. [204]

Mr. Byers: We are committed to establishing a funding system that does not discriminate unfairly between schools or pupils. We shall take work forward on that basis and will consult widely on specific proposals.

Sir Richard Body: Will the Minister give us some idea of what principles will guide the re-allocation of that money?

Mr. Byers: The principles will be fairness and justice—and we saw very little of that under the previous Administration. This Government are about valuing all our children, not just a few. All of our policies will be based on those clear, fundamental principles.

Mrs. Browning: On the subject of fairness and justice, I remind the hon. Gentleman of the letter that he sent me two days ago, outlining why the Secretary of State had refused GM status to a Roman Catholic senior school for girls in Exeter. In the final paragraph of that letter, he informed me:

"At local level, a spirit of partnership will prevail to help those parents whose children will not be able to return to Mount St. Mary's in September."

Presumably, that partnership will come from the local education authority.

Is the Minister aware that I received information today that the LEA, the chief education officer and the council's officers have sent e-mails to people who opposed GM status for Mount St. Mary's, congratulating them and thanking them for their support? What fairness and justice is there in asking parents to send their children 60 miles away in order to access a Catholic education when the person that the Minister recommends as having a "spirit of partnership" has congratulated people for supporting his right hon. Friend's decision?

Mr. Byers: I am pleased to see the hon. Lady in her place. I thank her for the small part that she played in ensuring such a victory for the Labour party at the general election.

Mrs. Browning: Come on, let us have it. What about fairness and justice?

Mr. Byers: It is clear that the hon. Lady is not aware of the specific recommendations that were made by officials for grant-maintained status. Clear recommendations were made, and on balance my right hon. Friend decided to reject the application. The application was rejected, based on the principles of fairness and justice.

Unemployment (Seaside Towns)

16. Sir Teddy Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will review Her Majesty's Government's plans for dealing with unemployment levels in seaside towns in the south-east. [206]

Mr. Alan Howarth: We will indeed. We cannot accept unemployment at its present level, whether in seaside towns in the south-east or anywhere else. That is why we are already engaged in detailed and urgent work to introduce our new programmes to help the long-term unemployed and get 250,000 young people into jobs. The hon. Gentleman will be aware that his constituents are benefiting from the European programme KONVER II and that they are eligible to benefit from European social funding objective 3. Possibly the hon. Gentleman would regard those as tainted sources.

Sir Teddy Taylor: Is the Minister prepared to be serious and to tell me how much cash has come to Southend, East, as set against the monstrous amount of grants, loans and subsidies going to other parts of the country? Perhaps he should take the issue more seriously. Does he accept that the seaside towns have a real problem of high unemployment? My constituency has unemployment of more than 10 per cent. That creates a great deal of misery and lack of opportunity. Will the Minister be prepared to consider establishing a special study to examine whether there is an equal sphere of public investment? Secondly, should there not be a study of the utter distortion that is created by grants, loans and subsidies that are given to other areas with much lower rates of unemployment?

Mr. Howarth: The funding from the KONVER II programme to the hon. Gentleman's constituency is £105,000. Much more substantially, the hon. Gentleman's constituents are benefiting from single regeneration budget funding of £2.2 million to regenerate the area of Shoeburyness. The hon. Gentleman is right in contending that these programmes must be kept under review, and that is what we shall do. Apart from anything else, we need the most accurate and up-to-date map of unemployment. Much unemployment is concentrated in compact, tightly drawn geographical areas. In those areas, we need to understand as much as we can about the nature of the local unemployment problem.

I shall value the hon. Gentleman's advice, as will Ministers and officials at the Department of Trade and Industry. We shall have much in mind the real and distinctive problems that are suffered by the hon. Gentleman's constituents.

Information Technology

17. Ms Moran: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what steps the Government are taking to agree and publish national targets for training in appropriate IT skills. [207]

Dr. Howells: The development of appropriate IT skills is a clear priority both for young people and adults. We are currently considering whether setting a national target is the most effective way to proceed.

Ms Moran: I wish warmly to respond to my hon. Friend's positive note. I know that national standards will help young people in Luton to obtain access to jobs in future. I commend to my hon. Friend particularly a project involving Luton council and the Luton-Dunstable partnership, which involves IT skills and standards, and which is of particular benefit in helping women in my constituency to gain access to employment.

Dr. Howells: I thank my hon. Friend. I shall examine closely the Luton scheme if she will furnish me with details of it. My hon. Friend is right to highlight the value of information technology skills. It is no exaggeration to say that if children do not have IT skills it is a loss as great as not being able to write or to be numerate when it comes to finding employment in what is becoming increasingly an electronically based economy.

Nursery Vouchers

18. Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many nursery vouchers had been issued to parents in England at the latest date for which information is available. [208]

Ms Estelle Morris: At the beginning of this week, some 618,000 vouchers for the summer term had been sent to parents of eligible four-year-olds in England.

Mr. Lidington: Can the hon. Lady say how great an increase she expects to see in the provision of nursery places for four-year-olds in the first year of the new scheme that the Government now plan to introduce?

Ms Morris: Yes. We do expect to see an increase in the number of places available for four-year-olds and we have a target to achieve that by September of next year. The hon. Gentleman must remember that what we now have available is all the money that his Government wasted in expensive advertising and bureaucracy. We intend to put that towards providing good-quality education for four-year-olds.

Mr. Pike: I welcome all that the Minister and my colleagues on the Government Front Bench have said this afternoon about nursery education and the ending of nursery vouchers, but will she say that the Government now recognise the importance of nursery education to our children and that, in due course, nursery education will be included in the standard spending assessment for education?

Ms Morris: We have always recognised the importance of early years education. In fact, many Labour local authorities throughout the country have excellent records in ensuring that the children in their areas receive it. We will, of course, develop plans so that not only will all four-year-olds receive good quality nursery education, but that that opportunity will also be available to three-year-olds.

Business of the House

3.31 pm

Mr. Alastair Goodlad (Eddisbury): May I ask the Leader of the House to give us the business for after the Whitsun recess?

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Ann Taylor): The business for the first week back after the recess will be as follows:

MONDAY 2 JUNE—Until 10 pm, Second Reading of the Education (Schools) Bill.

Motion on the Northern Ireland (Entry to Negotiations, etc) Act 1996 (Revival of Section 3) Order.

TUESDAY 3 JUNE—Consideration in Committee of the Referendums (Scotland and Wales) Bill.

WEDNESDAY 4 JUNE—Until 2 pm, there will be debates on the motion for the Adjournment of the House.

Starting at 3.30 pm, conclusion of consideration in Committee and remaining stages of the Referendums (Scotland and Wales) Bill.

Motion on the Select Committee on the Modernisation of the House of Commons.

THURSDAY 5 JUNE—Consideration in Committee and remaining stages of the Education (Schools) Bill.

FRIDAY 6 JUNE—Debate on the governance of London on a motion for the Adjournment of the House.

MONDAY 9 JUNE—Debate on the European Union on a Government motion.

Motion on the Draft Firearms (Amendment) Act 1997 compensation scheme.

Mr. Goodlad: I thank the right hon. Lady. May I remind her that she said that she would give us two weeks' business, where possible? Can she give any indication of the likely business for the rest of the week beginning Monday 9 June?

We are grateful that the Committee stage of the referendums Bill is to be taken on the Floor of the House. Can the Leader of the House give us a commitment, which she could not last week, that all constitutional Bills will similarly be taken on the Floor?

Can she say—rather more precisely than her right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland did yesterday—when the White Papers on the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly will be published? Does she believe that Parliament's right to amend the legislation following the referendums will be constrained by the results of those referendums or not? Does she agree that the Government's plans to introduce a Scottish Parliament and a Welsh Assembly diminish the authority of the House? Will she undertake to provide more time, if necessary, for the House to reflect on the Referendums (Scotland and Wales) Bill?

Will the Leader of the House provide more than one day for consideration in Committee and for the Third Reading of the Education (Schools) Bill, not least as it is the Governments's intention not to publish that important Bill until tomorrow, when the House will have risen for the Whitsun recess?

Will the Leader of the House confirm that the debate on Monday 9 June will be the pre-Amsterdam intergovernmental conference debate, and that that will

be the first day only of a two-day debate to allow for contributions from hon. Members on both sides of the House who will wish to participate in large numbers?

Will a White Paper or other document be published before the debate on the governance of London on Friday 6 June?

Does the Leader of the House agree that the debate on the modernisation of House of Commons procedures will be a serious one, in which many hon. Members will wish to participate, and that it is most inconvenient that it should be taken at the end of what may turn out to be a late night on the Committee stage of the Referendums (Scotland and Wales) Bill? Would it not be more appropriate to take it at the beginning rather than at the end of a day?

Will the right hon. Lady give time for a debate on the massive increase in political appointments in Whitehall, which is giving rise to increasing concern about the potential politicisation of the civil service by the Government? *[Interruption.]* The right hon. Lady will wish to compare the number of political appointments made by this Government in Whitehall with those made by the previous Government. It will be a salutary figure, particularly for Labour Members who have come here as Lobby fodder.

We welcome the Government's expression of their determination to set up the Select Committees as soon as possible—an intention which we support. When will the motions to set up the House of Commons Commission and the Select Committees be tabled? In particular, when will the Select Committee on Standards and Privileges be set up? It is clear that there will be a strong desire on both sides of the House to proceed as a matter of urgency, not least in the light of the allegations about the hon. Member for Glasgow, Govan (Mr. Sarwar).

Will the Leader of the House please tell us the proposed date for the Budget, and whether the Chancellor of the Exchequer will make a further statement on the Bank of England in the light of the Governor's reported proposal to resign over the proposed changes to the regulation of financial services?

May I remind the Leader of the House that on Tuesday, the advance copy of the Chancellor of the Exchequer's statement, which should have been in the hands of my right hon. and learned Friend the shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer by 3 o'clock at the latest, was in fact not delivered until after 3.15? Can the right hon. Lady confirm that she will make representations to her Cabinet colleagues to ensure that such a practice will not recur?

Does the right hon. Lady accept that, following the Prime Minister's remarks at Question Time yesterday, there is now great uncertainty about the Government's proposed windfall tax, and will she confirm that it is the Government's intention to allow time for a proper debate in the House on that matter in advance of the Budget, so that some of those uncertainties can be resolved? *[Interruption.]* Watch this space.

Finally, will the right hon. Lady ensure that her ministerial colleagues do not follow the Deputy Prime Minister's example in seeking to talk out the debate on the Queen's Speech—an humiliation from which he was

rescued only by your intervention, Madam Speaker—and that Ministers make some small effort to abide by our rules of procedure?

Mrs. Taylor: I shall endeavour to answer all the questions that have been put to me, which I hope will reduce the number of questions that others might put later, particularly in view of the time.

I hope that we can move towards achieving our ambition to produce two weeks' business, but I think that the shadow Leader of the House forgot that next week is a recess, so he does have the second week's business, and some indication of what is happening.

The right hon. Gentleman referred to the fact that we were taking the referendums Bill on the Floor of the House, and he asked whether all constitutional Bills could be dealt with in that way. I have nothing to add to what my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister said to him last week about that. The Secretaries of State for Wales and for Scotland have made it clear that the White Papers will be produced in good time for proper consideration by those who will vote in the referendums.

The right hon. Gentleman invited me to anticipate what will happen after the referendums. That is somewhat strange, as it would be unreasonable to second-guess the outcome. We are clear that, if the referendums result in a mandate for the devolution proposals, we will press ahead with legislation. We believe that a mandate was given in the general election, and the referendums invite people to confirm that opinion.

I regret that the Education (Schools) Bill, which will be considered next week, is not published today, although the long title is available. From education questions, it is clear that Conservative Members are aware of the content of that Bill. We have increased the time for Second Reading at the specific request of the Opposition. Therefore, hon. Members will have a considerable time in which to make their views known.

I confirm that the debate on the European Union will be the pre-Amsterdam debate. It will be a one-day debate, which is in line with the previous Government's practice of holding a one-day debate in such circumstances.

I do not think that there will be a White Paper in advance of the debate on London, which will be an opportunity for hon. Members to raise issues with the Ministers with direct responsibility. There should be a fair amount of interest in that debate.

Modernisation of procedures is a serious issue, and I hope that much interest will be shown from both sides of the House. The right hon. Gentleman should remember that the motion to establish the Select Committee on modernisation will be the second stage. We shall debate modernisation tonight, and I hope that we shall have the attendance in the Chamber that the right hon. Gentleman anticipates.

I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on making his complaint about the increase in political appointments and the politicisation of the civil service with a straight face, although his face was about to crack towards the end of his remarks.

We need no lectures from Conservatives Members on that issue. The right hon. Gentleman referred to my hon. Friends as Lobby fodder. He has not got it quite right: my hon. Friends are here to make their voices heard. In the

three-hour Adjournment debate yesterday, it was evident that Labour Members want to make their voices heard. During the whole three hours, there was only one Conservative contribution, there was not even a winding-up speech by an Opposition Front-Bench Member, and at times the Front Bench was empty. Perhaps the right hon. Gentleman is complaining with his Chief Whip's hat on because he has no Lobby fodder.

I appreciate the right hon. Gentleman's comments about Select Committees. I am grateful for what he said through the usual channels about hoping to establish Select Committees as soon as possible. We share that feeling, and I hope that we can make early progress after the Whitsun recess.

I cannot give the House today a date for the Budget, but we shall make an announcement as soon as possible. If the shadow Chancellor did not receive yesterday's statement by 3 pm, that was wrong, and we should apologise for it. I have mentioned the matter to colleagues, and we shall take steps to ensure that statements that should be available to the official Opposition and anyone else, including you, Madam Speaker, will be delivered at the appropriate time. We complained about such slippage when we were in opposition, so we have no reason to repeat it.

As for the windfall tax, I think that our policy purpose is clear, and I see no point in debating the matter before the Budget. With respect to my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister, I thought that the situation at the end of the debate was handled admirably.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Speaker: Order. Of necessity, that was a long exchange. I do not intend to take long statements from Back Benchers; they should be brisk, limited to one question and directly to the point.

Mr. Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North): Has my right hon. Friend seen early-day motion 38?

[That this House welcomes the commitment of over 70 heads of government, including the British Prime Minister to attend Earth Summit II in New York from 23rd to 27th June; calls for an early parliamentary debate to ensure that the British delegation is fully briefed on this House's concerns, concerning climate, finance, forests and fresh water to ensure a sustainable future for the planet.]

The motion concerns the summit that is to take place in New York at the end of the month. I am sure that my right hon. Friend will agree that it is extremely important. Will she arrange for the House to be able to discuss global warming and environmental sustainability before the large and important British delegation goes to the conference?

Mrs. Taylor: I am not sure that it will be possible to arrange the kind of debate that my hon. Friend envisages. He may know, however, that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has announced his intention to attend the summit, and he will be addressing the United Nations General Assembly in New York towards the end of June. The Government have made it clear that the goal of sustainable development is one of the major challenges we face, is important to Government policy, and will be

[Mrs. Taylor]

taken on board by all Ministers. Although I cannot promise the debate that my hon. Friend wants, I hope that he will think that that is a step in the right direction.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): In view of the leadership bid that we heard just now from the acting shadow Leader of the House, may I reassure the House that I am making no such bid in relation to my party?

Mr. Andrew MacKay (Bracknell): Not until the second round.

Mr. Tyler: We might make a bid for the leadership of the hon. Gentleman's party in the second round.

May I ask the Leader of the House to give us a specific assurance about important announcements relating to local government, particularly in respect of the capping of local authority expenditure limits, and both the release and the distribution of capital receipts from the right-to-buy programme? Those matters are extremely important to local authorities, as I am sure the Leader of the House understands, and it would be intolerable if such statements were made outside the House rather than in the House, so that hon. Members can hear them and explore their implications.

Mrs. Taylor: The hon. Gentleman will know that the issue of capping was raised by one of his hon. Friends during yesterday's Adjournment debate. We believe that caps are necessary in certain circumstances, and, when an authority is capped, it has 28 days in which to challenge the decision. The hon. Gentleman may also have noticed that his hon. Friend the Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris) has secured a debate on Wednesday week about one of the authorities concerned.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): May I ask my right hon. Friend—in a constructive way—whether it would be possible, during the week when we return, to hear a statement outlining what the Government intend to do to ensure that all parties represented in the House of Commons must themselves ensure that hon. Members have a vote in the leadership ballot? Would that not prevent a situation in which 164 Tory Members of Parliament can decide who should be the Leader of the Opposition?

Mrs. Taylor: My hon. Friend will, I think, acknowledge that I have no responsibility for elections in other parties. [Interruption.] The hon. Member says, "Quite right." I must admit that I am very glad that I do not have any such responsibility, and I think that many Opposition Members wish that they did not, either.

I am, however, concerned about the fact that there are occasions on which the leadership ballot dominates the official Opposition to such an extent that they spend all their time on that, and very little time considering the business of the House.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): Can the Leader of the House clarify the position relating to the referendums Bill? Will there be a timetable motion before we debate it on the Floor of the House? If so, how much

time does the right hon. Lady expect that the House will be given to discuss that extremely important Bill? Is she prepared to extend the time when she sees how many amendments have been tabled, if there are a great many?

Mrs. Taylor: We have provided a day and a half for Second Reading. The Bill is simple and straightforward; there has already been considerable debate on it, and more will follow today. We are providing two full days, and I hope that that will be adequate. Given the nature of the Bill, I think that it will be.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): My right hon. Friend will be aware that the last Government left a number of nasty little time bombs ticking away in the transport world, including the franchises that have been granted to privatised railways. Will she assure us that, when the Select Committees are set up, there will be a separate Select Committee on Transport to consider many of the problems that we face?

Mrs. Taylor: I am sympathetic to the need for a separate Select Committee, which will form part of the discussions through the usual channels.

Mr. Michael Colvin (Romsey): The Leader of the House will be aware that the NATO summit takes place in July in Madrid. One of the most important items on the agenda will be the enlargement of NATO, which will have profound effects not only on the defence of our realm but on the cost of NATO membership. As no specific day was set aside for a debate on defence during the debates on the Loyal Address, could the right hon. Lady give an undertaking that the House will have an opportunity to debate defence matters between now and the end of June? In particular, some reports from the Select Committee on Defence in the last Parliament are still on the Table awaiting a Government reply.

Mrs. Taylor: I understand the hon. Gentleman's point. The parliamentary timetable is extremely crowded, but I will look at the matter that he raises. I remind him that there will be Defence questions on 16 June, during which he could raise some of the issues that he mentions.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is a bit rich for Tory Members who have already taken part in these exchanges to ask for extra time for common market debates, when, not so long ago, in the memory of almost everybody here, we had to drag a Tory Minister kicking and screaming from a Committee Room upstairs to have even a one-day debate on the common market?

Will she ask the Secretary of State for Social Security to look not only into the backlog in Child Support Agency applications but into the growing backlog of appeals on disability living allowance? We shall have to clean up the two Tory Acts relating to those matters. That will take a bit of time, but we must have some assurances that those backlogs will be removed.

Mrs. Taylor: I appreciate my hon. Friend's comments about EU debates in the past. I hope that we will not see such spectacles in future. He asked about social security issues and outstanding work. We all know from our casework the problems that the CSA and other agencies

have created. I know that my hon. Friends in the appropriate Department are anxious to streamline procedures and to move quickly, because, as my hon. Friend says, there is a significant backlog of work, which requires a great deal of attention.

Mr. William Cash (Stone): The right hon. Lady referred to the spectacle, as she put it, of a past debate. Of course, the need to hold that debate on the Floor of the House had to do with the stability pact. Does the right hon. Lady acknowledge that the forthwith motion that was tabled in consequence of the recommendations of the Select Committee on European Legislation has not yet been taken? Can she assure us that it will be dealt with soon? The Prime Minister is going to Noordwijk tomorrow, and that means that there will be a European Council meeting without a subsequent statement. Does she not agree that that is a most unsatisfactory state of affairs?

Mrs. Taylor: There will be a chance to raise all those issues in the debate that I have announced. The debate on 9 June will be to discuss all the issues raised at Amsterdam. I am sure that, given his usual interest in these matters, the hon. Gentleman will try to catch your eye, Madam Speaker, during that debate.

Mr. Harry Barnes (North-East Derbyshire): Thanks to the initiative of hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth (Mr. Healey), we have had an Adjournment debate on opencast mining. May we have a fully fledged debate on this matter? Labour published a 10-point programme on opencast mining which I used widely in my constituency, and we are keen to raise some matters from that. For instance, I should like to raise the question of the Avenue Court works, because I twice asked the previous Government to call in the planning agreements to operate in that area, and I ask for that to be done by this Government.

Mrs. Taylor: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that subject, because, like him, I have a constituency interest, and, also like him, I campaigned on the issue during the general election. My hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth was fortunate to have an early debate on this, and I know that opencast mining concerns many people. I will bring my hon. Friend's comments to the attention of my ministerial colleagues.

Mr. Alex Salmond (Banff and Buchan): Could the Leader of the House arrange for an urgent statement about the problems that are being experienced by Dayavanti Pictures, a film company that is trying to make a major feature film in the Scottish highlands? It has found that 16 of its cast and crew of 80 have suggested that they might be denied entry visas. A message has been passed to me in the past few seconds to the effect that circumstances might be improving.

Does the right hon. Lady understand that many of us had hoped that the behaviour of entry clearance officers would change with the change of Government, but that that does not seem to have happened? Does she appreciate that such matters are vital to Scotland's economy at a time when we are trying to market the country as a major film location? The behaviour of entry clearance officers is deeply insulting and embarrassing to the Asian

community in Scotland, who have done so much work in trying to persuade this major film company to choose Scotland as a film location in Europe.

Mrs. Taylor: I will look into the issue that the hon. Gentleman has raised. I presume that it is a matter of entry visas and work permits. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland is here on the Bench, and has also noted the hon. Gentleman's comments. We have not had any messages in the last few seconds such as the hon. Gentleman has had, so perhaps we are not so up to date as him, but we will look into the issue.

Ms Joan Walley (Stoke-on-Trent, North): May I add my concern to that which has already been expressed that there should be an early opportunity to discuss early-day motion 38? The earth summit in New York is approaching. It will be attended by Heads of Government. We have a wonderful opportunity to put the environment at the heart of our new Government, after it was abandoned by the previous Government. I urge my right hon. Friend to consider the matter closely.

Mrs. Taylor: I note the comments of my hon. Friend. Perhaps this is a matter on which she and her colleagues could consider making an application for a Wednesday morning debate.

Mr. Patrick Nicholls (Teignbridge): Will the right hon. Lady consider a short debate on standards in public life? Would it not give the House an opportunity to explore the paradox that, when the former Member of Parliament for Tatton was accused of impropriety, the Labour party said that he should be rejected from the House right away? As the Labour party has taken an entirely different attitude to the allegations in respect of the hon. Member for Glasgow, Govan (Mr. Sarwar), such a debate would provide an opportunity at this early stage in the Parliament to reject the charge of double standards, or perhaps no standards whatever.

Mrs. Taylor: The hon. Gentleman should welcome what the Labour party has done in Scotland in calling in the police. If there are any double standards, they have just been demonstrated by the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Lawrence Cunliffe (Leigh): Does my hon. Friend agree that any great reforming Labour Government would give priority first and foremost to its pensioners? When does she expect that the pensions review will take place? Has she seen and noted early-day motion 1, the first of this new Parliament?

[That this House celebrates with joy and hope the election of what will be a great reforming Labour Government; applauds its manifesto declaration that 'all pensioners should share fairly in the increasing prosperity of the nation'; asserts that this can be achieved for the present generation of pensioners only by restoring the link between basic pensions and average earnings; urges an immediate start to the promised manifesto review of 'all aspects of the basic pension and its value, second pensions including SERPS and community care' and a renewal of the commitment to retain SERPS.]

[*Mr. Lawrence Cunliffe*]

It expresses concern that, according to our manifesto declarations, pensioners should be able to share in the economic prosperity of the country as soon as possible. When does she expect the review and a debate in the House?

Mrs. Taylor: A review cannot take place overnight, but my right hon. and hon. Friends in the Department of Social Security are considering the matter with a view to making progress as quickly as possible. I think that all hon. Members will acknowledge that it is a complex matter. We have made some clear commitments in the manifesto about the basic state pension as the foundation of pension provision, but an overall review will inevitably take some time.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): May I refer back to the question asked by the Liberal Democrat spokesman, the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler), about local authority capital receipts? The right hon. Lady failed to respond to that part of his question. When do the Government intend to make some statement on the matter? Is it their intention to allow the authority in question to retain its own capital receipts and spend them, or to take that money away from some authorities and distribute it elsewhere?

Mrs. Taylor: I have to remind the hon. Gentleman that it was his Government who froze capital receipts. We have made it clear that there will be action to release capital receipts on a phased basis as soon as possible. It was mentioned during the debate on the Queen's Speech. When we come to the next stage, the appropriate statements will be made.

Mr. Barry Jones (Alyn and Deeside): What is the prospect of a debate on Britain's aerospace industry? British Aerospace workers in my constituency are asking questions about grant aid for the CXX project—the future large aircraft project—and Raytheon workers are asking for a share of the Government's Astra project. Can my right hon. Friend help by providing a debate?

Mrs. Taylor: I am not sure whether we can have such a debate in the near future, but I will pass on my hon. Friend's concerns to right hon. Friends at the Department. My hon. Friend may want to consider that particular constituency interest as a matter on which to apply for an Adjournment Debate.

Mr. David Lidington (Aylesbury): Will the right hon. Lady give priority to re-establishing the Select Committee on European Legislation and the associated Standing Committees? Will she assure the House that the Government will not agree to any European directive or other legislation that might now be pending until the proper process of parliamentary scrutiny has been followed through?

Mrs. Taylor: I have made it clear that I am extremely anxious to move quickly on the re-establishment of all

Select Committees, and that would include all the Committees which also consider delegated or secondary legislation and European legislation.

Mr. Neil Gerrard (Walthamstow): Will my right hon. Friend consider whether it might be possible to find some time in the near future for a major debate on foreign affairs? I understand that it was not possible to hold such debate on the Queen's Speech. I am sure that she will appreciate, however, that current conditions in Kashmir, in Sri Lanka and particularly in the middle east are of great concern to a number of hon. Members who would welcome the opportunity for such a major debate, when we could raise our concerns with Foreign Office Ministers.

Mrs. Taylor: I understand my hon. Friend's concern, because he has always taken an interest in foreign affairs. As I said earlier, the parliamentary timetable is somewhat crowded at the moment. It was decided through the usual channels that there would not be a foreign affairs debate during the Queen's Speech, which would have normally provided an opportunity for hon. Members to express their concerns. We are therefore aware that there is a potential gap for such a debate, but I can only repeat that the parliamentary timetable is somewhat crowded. It might be difficult to find a suitable space, but I will bear in mind my hon. Friend's representations.

Mr. Peter Luff (Mid-Worcestershire): Notwithstanding the right hon. Lady's earlier reply, may I urge her to give absolute priority to the establishment of the Select Committee on Standards and Privileges, since those of us on the Conservative Benches at least believe that that is the right place for this House to reassert its belief that an individual is innocent until proven guilty, whether in Glasgow, Govan or in Tatton?

Mrs. Taylor: I have made it clear that I am very much in favour of the Standards and Privileges Committee continuing its work as quickly as possible.

Mr. Dafis: May I add my voice to those of the two Labour Members who have stressed the importance of a debate on the Earth summit II? There are various ways in which that could be managed. It is terribly important that hon. Members who are interested should be able to convey to the Government the great importance that they attach to that major international event, probably the most important such event in which the Government will be involved this year. May I also suggest that there should be a statement following that summit?

Mrs. Taylor: The hon. Gentleman, who tabled the relevant early-day motion, is well known for his interest in such matters over many years, and I congratulate him on his persistence. He has said that the summit is an important event, and I hope that he will acknowledge that the Government have recognised it as such, because the Prime Minister himself has decided to attend. I will consider the hon. Gentleman's request about any possible need for a statement following the Earth Summit.

Points of Order

4.2 pm

Sir Peter Emery (East Devon): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. I should like to raise a point of order of which I have given you notice concerning a photograph of my right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Cambridgeshire (Dr. Mawhinney), which was published on page 9 of *The Mirror* yesterday. That paper produced a photograph that had been given to it, which showed my right hon. Friend taking a quick snack on the Terrace of the House of Commons.

No permission had been obtained by the person taking the photograph, and when my right hon. Friend approached that person, he discovered that it was the new hon. Member for Oldham, East and Saddleworth (Mr. Woolas). The hon. Member said that he did not realise that photographs should not be taken, that it was for his own private collection, and that it would never be published. It is therefore rather strange that it found its way to the political editor of *The Mirror*, where it was published with a story underneath that made it quite clear that the hon. Member for Oldham, East and Saddleworth knew what he was doing when he gave that photograph to that political editor. The article is in no way complimentary, as one might expect; it is a denigration of my right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Cambridgeshire.

That is the initial matter. The second is that it appears to me that the political editor of a national newspaper would know only too well that the picture was taken incorrectly. He was willing to build on it, publish it—despite assurances that it would not be published—and write a story scathing of the Conservative party and of my right hon. Friend. The action of that political editor is open to censure—[*Interruption.*] I can go on much longer, if that is what hon. Members want—

Madam Speaker: Order. The right hon. Gentleman cannot do so; he must come to his point now.

Sir Peter Emery: The hon. Member for Oldham, East and Saddleworth is new. However, he gave a pledge to my right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Cambridgeshire that the picture would not be published; having then allowed it to be published must leave him open to considerable condemnation.

Madam Speaker: The rules for photography are perfectly clear. Hon. Members and visitors accompanied by hon. Members may take photographs on the Terrace. That arrangement is appreciated, and I certainly would not wish to stop it. However, no person may be photographed without his or her express permission anywhere within the precincts of the Palace of Westminster. New Members should take the trouble to familiarise themselves with the regulations on such matters—and, indeed, on the use of the Terrace in general.

In the particular case to which the right hon. Member for East Devon (Sir P. Emery) referred, a serious discourtesy to a colleague has occurred. I look to the hon. Member concerned to make an immediate apology to the right hon. Member for North-West Cambridgeshire (Dr. Mawhinney), and also to explain to the House how the photograph found its way into the national press.

As regards the role of the journalist concerned, I most strongly deprecate his action. He is a member of the Lobby and, by his own admission, knew that the photograph had been taken contrary to our regulations. The House can be sure that I am taking up the matter separately with those involved.

Mr. Phil Woolas (Oldham, East and Saddleworth): Thank you, Madam Speaker—I apologise unreservedly. I very much regret the incident, and I have written to the right hon. Member for North-West Cambridgeshire (Dr. Mawhinney) saying so. The incident occurred last Wednesday, when a group of friends were on the Terrace. I was asked by a lady present to take a photograph, which I did. Much to my distress, I was informed a week later that it was to be published in the *Daily Mirror*. I subsequently wrote to the right hon. Gentleman expressing my distress and apologising to him.

I now understand that photographs are not meant to be taken within the precincts of the Palace of Westminster, and I regret that previously I was unaware of that fact. I have apologised to the right hon. Gentleman, and I now apologise to you, Madam Speaker, and to the House for my ignorance surrounding the incident.

Madam Speaker: Thank you.

Dr. Brian Mawhinney (North-West Cambridgeshire): I am happy to accept unreservedly the unreserved apology of the hon. Member for Oldham, East and Saddleworth (Mr. Woolas).

Madam Speaker: That is the end of the matter.

Mr. Michael Colvin (Romsey): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. I know that you deplore long oral questions and equally discourage Ministers from giving long answers. Unfortunately, answers from the Dispatch Box tend to be longer, because Ministers want to give as much information as possible and the answers are read out.

There is a time-honoured tradition in this place that hon. Members do not read oral questions. Is not there a danger that, if that tradition is broken and hon. Members start reading them, the oral questions will just get longer? When I arrived in this place, I was told by the Prime Minister of the day that it was rather more difficult to ask oral questions than it was to answer them. I am sure that that is understood by hon. Members who have just arrived in this place. However, I would like your comments, Madam Speaker, on the time-honoured tradition that oral questions should be memorised, not read.

Madam Speaker: The hon. Gentleman is correct: oral questions should not be read, but should be memorised and worked out over lunch; they should be two or three lines long and to the point, and they should be delivered briskly. Hon. Members should not come to the House not knowing what they are going to ask in their supplementary question, which should certainly not be read. Of course, from time to time one has to look at the odd word.

I am afraid that even hon. Members of long standing forget our traditions, and the hon. Gentleman's point of order gives me the opportunity to jog the memory of

[Madam Speaker]

long-standing Members and let new Members know that they must do their homework over lunch, and come to the Chamber fully prepared.

Now, Mr. Cash—point of order.

Mr. William Cash (Stone): My point of order relates to the referendums Bill, and it may be more convenient if I raise it when the Bill is introduced.

Madam Speaker: Very well. It would in fact be better for the hon. Gentleman to do that.

BILLS PRESENTED

LOCAL GOVERNMENT FINANCE (SUPPLEMENTARY CREDIT APPROVALS)

Mr. Secretary Prescott, supported by the Prime Minister, Mr. Chancellor of the Exchequer, Mr. Secretary Davies, Ms Hilary Armstrong, Mr. Nick Raynsford and Mr. Win Griffiths, presented a Bill to permit account to be taken of the reserved part of capital receipts in determining the amount of a supplementary credit approval to be issued to a local authority; and to substitute a power for the existing duty to specify an amortisation period when issuing a supplementary credit approval to a local authority in respect of expenditure treated by the authority as expenditure for capital purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time upon 2 June, and to be printed [Bill 2].

EDUCATION (SCHOOLS)

Mr. Secretary Blunkett, supported by the Prime Minister, Mr. Secretary Prescott, Mr. Chancellor of the Exchequer, Mr. Secretary Dewar, Mr. Secretary Davies, Mr. Stephen Byers and Ms Estelle Morris, presented a Bill to make provision for and in connection with the ending of the assisted places schemes in England and Wales and in Scotland: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time upon 2 June, and to be printed [Bill 4].

FIREARMS (AMENDMENT)

Mr. Secretary Straw, supported by the Prime Minister, Mr. Secretary Prescott, Mr. Secretary Dewar, Mr. Secretary Robertson, Mr. Secretary Davies and Mr. Alun Michael, presented a Bill to extend the class of prohibited weapons under the Firearms Act 1968 to include small-calibre pistols: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time upon 2 June, and to be printed [Bill 3].

Orders of the Day

Referendums (Scotland and Wales) Bill

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on amendment to the Question [21 May], That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Which amendment was: To leave out from 'That' to the end of the Question and to add instead thereof—

'this House declines to give a Second Reading to the Referendums (Scotland and Wales) Bill because it would ask voters to give blanket approval to proposals in advance of legislation being published, debated, amended or agreed; and believes that such referendums should only be held after full and detailed scrutiny of the legislation in question on the floor of the House of Commons'—
[Mr. Howard.]

Question again proposed, That the amendment be made.

Mr. William Cash (Stone): On a point of order, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: I shall take the hon. Gentleman's point of order as I think I have the answer that he wants.

Mr. Cash: In my exchanges with the Secretary of State for Scotland yesterday, I raised what I termed the United Kingdom question. I then found it necessary to table an instruction last night, the effect of which would be to ensure that, if the House deemed it necessary, amendments would be tabled to the Bill to extend the franchise to the electorate of the United Kingdom as a whole. Following discussions this morning, I have been given to understand that you, Madam Speaker, may be prepared to give a ruling on the matter so that we can be sure that we shall be able to table amendments to extend the franchise to the electorate of the United Kingdom as a whole. May I ask for your ruling on the matter?

Madam Speaker: I have carefully considered the instruction tabled by the hon. Gentleman and decided not to select it for the simple reason that, in this case, it is unnecessary. The hon. Gentleman and any other hon. Members may table such amendments as he has in mind.

4.12 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Peter Hain): My contribution to the Welsh part of the Bill will be brief and will serve as an hors d'oeuvre to the main course provided by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State. It is a privilege and an honour to be a Minister in the Welsh Office during one of the most exciting and reforming periods in the history of Welsh politics. For the first time in 18 long and miserable years, is it not wonderful to have a Secretary of State who can speak with authority for Wales because he represents a constituency in Wales? He is not a Welsh leader who treats his important office as a platform for his crackpot ideology or one for whom the office is a youth training scheme. The Secretary of State is a man of the people and will govern for the people of Wales.

The referendum is an important step towards creating a new democratic settlement that will take Wales into the next century with confidence and dynamism. The referendum is a passport to a new participatory Welsh

democracy in which decisions will be brought closer to the people. Under our new Welsh Assembly, power will shift down from Westminster to Wales. There will be a new partnership with local government, which will be liberated from the suffocating centralised control of the Tory years. It will unite all parts of Wales—north and south, east and west, valleys and towns, rural and urban areas.

Details of the referendum will be in the White Paper; every voter will be well aware of the Government's plans. The referendum will be held on the principle of an Assembly, and that has been well publicised and well argued. It was set out clearly in our election manifesto and in documents issued by the Welsh Labour party over the past two years, so it has been widely debated in Wales.

We have one of the biggest mandates for this policy ever enjoyed by an incoming Government. May I remind Conservative Members that the people of England also gave an overwhelming mandate for this policy? The Tories polled just 34 per cent. of the vote in England, compared with a combined pro-devolution Labour and Liberal vote of 62 per cent., despite the Tories trying to frighten the pants off everyone during the election campaign by having as one of their main planks spurious claims that devolution would lead to the break-up of the United Kingdom. Our mandate included an absolute promise to consult the people before proceeding with legislation to introduce an Assembly. We are now keeping our promise with this Bill.

A new assembly will mean employment policies tailored to the needs of Wales; health programmes geared to the needs of Wales; housing policies that reflect Welsh wishes; and education policies determined by Welsh priorities and not by those of an alien dogma, which turned our classrooms into laboratories for right-wing extremists. In the referendum vote in September, we shall invite the people to say yes to Wales—yes to an Assembly, yes to having a bigger say in decisions affecting their own lives. It will be an historic test of whether Wales is ready for the new millennium. Those who vote no will be locked in the past, saying that they have no confidence in our capacity as a nation to make decisions about our own future. Those who vote yes will be saying that we can build a better Wales—we can utilise our talent to forge a new future. As a Government, we shall work hard to persuade the people to vote yes and the Labour party will mount a vigorous campaign, led by the Prime Minister, to persuade the people to vote yes.

We say to each and every Labour supporter, this is a loyalty vote in your new Labour Government. Do not side with the Tories in undermining such a crucial part of our programme by voting no or by not bothering to vote at all. The new Assembly will include the views of supporters of other parties. We have had enough of government by one-party diktat—we want a Government for all the people. We say that the views of Liberals, nationalists and even Conservatives—if any are ever again elected in Wales—views will be respected in the new democratic era.

I say bluntly to those Conservatives who appear not to have noticed that they were wiped out in Wales: "You lost—in fact, you got hammered." The victory on 1 May of my hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd, West (Mr. Thomas) did a great favour, not only for the Labour party, but for humanity. Rod Richards was the only Conservative who could make even the right hon.

Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) seem popular in Wales. It is important to ask why the Conservatives are so frightened of giving the people a say. Is it because many Tories will also vote yes? I remind the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague) that only one Welsh Conservative—Viscount St. Davids—has so far spoken on devolution in this Parliament, and he supported a Welsh Assembly. Is that to be a pattern for the Conservative party in Wales, or part of the constantly shifting fudge of Welsh Tory politics in the new era?

There is now a great tide flowing through Wales in favour of grasping this opportunity for devolution. We shall not be left behind when the Scots get devolution or when even Londoners get an elected authority. We shall not throw away this opportunity to replace the Tory quango state with democratic government. Nearly 700,000 people who were not old enough to be on the electoral register in 1979 will have the chance to vote for the first time for a Welsh Assembly. Through bands such as Catatonia and the Manic Street Preachers, Welsh youth is leading the way, not only in the pop world, but for a yes vote as well. Leading Welsh business men and women are uniting with trade unionists, with the churches and with prominent figures from sport and the arts to say yes for Wales. Even those who do not support every detail of Labour's proposed Welsh Assembly have said that they will vote yes for Wales.

People who want a stronger assembly, or a different one, or a different voting system, can still vote yes with integrity—indeed they must, because otherwise there will be no Bill in the House to try to amend. Only if we get a yes vote on the principle will there be an opportunity to test the different arguments on the detail. Only if there is a yes vote will there be the opportunity to review the assembly's operation in future years and to consider whether changes would be desirable in the light of such a review.

Mr. Dafydd Wigley (Caernarfon): I welcome the Minister to his post. The hon. Gentleman is aware that there is considerable support among those who want an elected tier of Welsh democracy for that assembly or Parliament to have primary law-making powers for at least some functions. He has now said that there may be opportunities to amend the Bill if there is a yes vote. Will he undertake to ensure that the Bill will have a long title broad enough to include provisions for primary law-making powers?

Mr. Hain: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his remarks about my appointment. I am not inviting amendments to the Bill and I shall not necessarily greet them with enthusiasm, but he, Plaid Cymru, the Conservatives and the Liberals have the right to press their arguments, which we shall listen to although we shall also be bound by our overall policy. My argument is that unless the Bill gets into Parliament as a result of a yes vote in the referendum, that opportunity will not arise.

Unless the Government win the referendum, devolution in Wales will be dead in the water. There will not be another chance to create a Welsh Assembly or a Welsh Parliament. If Wales votes no to devolution for the second time in a generation, Wales can kiss goodbye to devolution. That is the blunt truth. No Government will bother with it again. This is our one and only chance. It is a once-in-a-lifetime vote. Let us go for it.

4.21 pm

Sir Teddy Taylor (Rochford and Southend, East): It is a privilege to be called so early in the debate. Newer Members will be aware of the nightmare of Back Benchers—that of waiting for hours, sometimes without being called in a debate. It is a privilege, for the first time for many years, to speak quite so early. I shall be brief.

The hon. Member for Neath (Mr. Hain), the spokesman for the Opposition, has just given us a sincere speech.

Mr. John Home Robertson (East Lothian): The Government, not the Opposition.

Sir Teddy Taylor: For the Government; my apologies.

The Minister must be aware that a fundamental constitutional change is taking place, which will cost a great deal of money and involve a great deal of change. How would he feel if such a proposal were put into practice on the strength of 21 per cent. voting yes, 19 per cent. voting no and the rest of the community in Wales saying that they could not care less?

The Government should be aware of another point. Older people such as myself were told passionately by the media that everyone was excited about and very much taken with the idea of devolution, and then, when the referendum was held in Scotland, we found out that a large proportion of the population were not remotely interested in the issue.

I have a great deal of sympathy with the Government because they are going through exactly what Sir Edward Heath's Government went through. They have adopted the principle of devolution. I am ashamed to say that, in our case, I gained the impression that we adopted that principle not because we believed in it but because we thought that it would help us as a defence against the Scottish nationalists.

I have a horrible feeling about the attitude of Labour Members to devolution. I mean this in all sincerity: I am not trying to attack politicians. The impression that I have gained from speaking to the majority of Labour Members, with a few exceptions, is that they are not at all keen on this business. They envisage huge problems, and they say that they adopted the proposal for the same bad reason that we did—because they believed that it would help to cope with Scottish nationalism. The House of Commons must appreciate that although there is a good and strong case for independence for Scotland and for Wales—although it is one with which I personally disagree—there is no argument whatever for devolution, which will lead to horrendous mistakes and will increase confusion and the pressure for separation.

I believe that the great majority of Members of Parliament do not believe in devolution. If a Scottish Parliament has no tax-raising powers, people in Scotland will blame London or the English for everything that goes wrong. Hon. Members will be well aware that the same occurs in relation to county councils—when things do not get done, people blame the Government. If anything goes wrong, those involved in a Scottish Parliament or Welsh Assembly will say that it is because they are not getting their share of the cash.

Mr. Cynog Dafis (Ceredigion): People do that now.

Sir Teddy Taylor: The hon. Gentleman is right, and that is the basis on which nationalism has received more

support than it otherwise merits. On the other hand, if a Scottish Parliament has tax-raising powers, it will lead inevitably to higher taxes in Scotland. As someone who has spent most of my life in Scotland, I am well aware that—for perfectly good and logical reasons—Scotland is subsidised by the rest of the UK. I am sure that the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Mr. Salmond) has figures to say that that is not so, but the plain fact is that Scotland does get subsidised. If a Scottish Parliament has separate tax-raising powers, it will mean higher taxation in Scotland and that will do no good.

Members of Parliament must think also about the democratic implications. For example, if I were a citizen of Wales or Scotland and I wished to complain about cuts in the schools programme, who would I contact? Who would I blame? Would I contact my county council? The council would say, "Not at all. The Assembly is to blame for not providing enough money." Would I contact my assemblyman in Wales or my Scottish parliamentarian? They would say, "It is not us—it is those London boys." A lot of people will be blaming each other, and it could be infinitely worse. There will be Members of this Parliament and members of the Scottish Parliament representing similar areas.

Mr. Denis MacShane (Rotherham): That happens in Europe.

Sir Teddy Taylor: How right the hon. Gentleman is to mention Europe. I am not blaming Europe, but I shall refer to my recent surgeries in Southend. I am sorry to have been distracted, because I promised to make a short speech. At my surgeries, people have asked me to campaign and vote against the export of live animals. I have had to say, "I am terribly sorry, but even if every Member of Parliament voted to ban such exports, nothing could be done. The power is gone."

In a neighbouring constituency, a pile of candidates representing all parties went to see fishermen at Leigh and all gave them great assurances. The fishermen then came to me and said, "Will you stop these nasty Spaniards coming here?" I had to say, "I am terribly sorry, but there is nothing that we can do. Even if every Member of Parliament wanted to do something, the power has gone."

I was visited by ladies from an Asda superstore, who complained about something that I did not understand—VAT on items of feminine hygiene. I do not know what they are, but I was asked if we could take VAT off them. I had to explain that Parliament does not have that power. So much power has been taken away from our democracy already, and we are now proposing to share it out among even more Parliaments. It will make a terrible mess.

If I am right—and I think I am—the Government now regret proposing devolution, but what can we do to help them and the United Kingdom? Of course, I may be wrong and the Government may be wildly enthusiastic about devolution. Frankly, on the basis of private discussions—which I will not repeat—I think that the great majority of hon. Members are now sorry they ever thought about devolution.

Mr. MacShane indicated dissent.

Sir Teddy Taylor: The first thing we can do is simple—so simple that even the hon. Member for

Rotherham (Mr. MacShane), who claims to be a democrat but supports the European Union, will understand it. Will he accept a simple proposition, which I hope the Government will accept? If people are dead keen on this business, what could be lost by having a 40 per cent. rule? [HON. MEMBERS: "Oh, no."] What is wrong with that? Unless 40 per cent. of the people of Wales or Scotland—50 per cent. would be even better—want devolution, we should not proceed with it.

Devolution will create terrible problems, lots of extra expense and a great deal of administration. Why not say to the people of Scotland, "If you are as keen on it as the minority in the Labour party argues, why not have a rule whereby, if 40 per cent. of you vote for it, it can go ahead, but not otherwise"?

I hope that hon. Members—particularly our delightful new Secretary of State for Scotland, who used to discuss the matter with me many years ago on Scottish television—will think about the real problems that the United Kingdom will have if we create a monstrosity whereby Members of Parliament such as the Secretary of State can vote on education or health Bills in England when English Members of Parliament will not have the equivalent power in Scotland. The issue has been raised time and again by the hon. Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell), who takes his job in the House of Commons more seriously than many. Is not there something democratically dangerous about it? Why should Scottish Members have that entitlement when Scotland will have more representation than the rest of the United Kingdom? Unless we face up to that question we shall create a democratic nightmare.

We shall not always have a party with a huge majority on one side of the House and a party with a small number on the other. I do not know which parties will survive in future, but the numbers will be closer. Other parties may take over. Indeed, we may even find that the Referendum party will suddenly lift off—anything could happen. If, in future, the position in the House of Commons were tight, Labour Members would not be happy to be outvoted by colleagues from other countries, when they will have no power over legislation in those countries.

Ms Rachel Squire (Dunfermline, West): What are the hon. Gentleman's views on what happened in the House over the past 18 years? The previous Government could ensure that hon. Members who represented neither Scottish nor Welsh constituencies forced through legislation, particularly Scottish legislation, which the majority of the people of Scotland neither wanted nor voted for.

Sir Teddy Taylor: The hon. Lady's point would be valid if she were a nationalist. I would agree absolutely with what she said if I believed that Scotland should be an independent sovereign state. I would then say, "What the blazes are these guys in London doing deciding for us?" However, we are part of the United Kingdom, so all United Kingdom Members of Parliament should determine those issues. The hon. Member for Dunfermline, West (Ms Squire)—she must be one of the new arrivals—[HON. MEMBERS: "No, she is not."] I apologise, I am half-blind. The hon. Lady should ask herself the simple question: what is the logic of legislation applying to England being voted on by people in other countries? It is wholly wrong and undemocratic. If there

were a political divide in this country whereby English Members could not control their administration whereas a separate Scottish Parliament could, it would be an appalling democratic outrage. Something must be done about that.

Some hon. Members, particularly those who favour more subsidies for everything, will say, "What does this matter? Isn't this silly? Why should we bother about it?" We must bother about it if we believe in democracy. Some of my hon. Friends and I have therefore tabled an amendment, which I hope the Government will accept. It simply says that we should face up to what we now call the West Lothian question and have a minimum percentage voting for the scheme.

I was a Scottish Member of Parliament for several years, then I ceased to be one, as have many other Conservatives in Scotland. I gained the impression that if an opinion poll was conducted and the average Scot was asked, "Do you want a Scottish Parliament?", most of them would say yes. There is no doubt about that. If, however, Scots were asked, "Would you like a Scottish Assembly that would have partial control of part of Scotland's affairs, that would add to public expenditure," and so on—if one explained the whole thing to them—the vast majority would say, "No, we don't want that at all."

I get the impression that if a proper referendum discussion was held, we would find—despite the smiles and smirks on the faces of some hon. Members—the great majority of people, who are not daft, would wake up and realise that they had been offered not a package for better constitutional government, but a package that would create frustration and add to the pressures for Scottish independence.

Let us discuss seriously and carefully among the people of Scotland and Wales whether independence is a good idea. There is a good argument for it, and it can be discussed logically and fairly, but devolution is a load of constitutional rubbish. It will create resentment, add to costs and create problems between the different democracies and administrations. It will create no good for Scotland or for Wales.

I may be wrong, as I am sure that some of my colleagues would agree that I may be wrong on other things. I hope, however, just in case I am right, that the Government will accept the simple propositions that I have advanced in the amendment. Why should there not be a minimum percentage? Will the Government say what on earth we can do about the West Lothian question? If they do not face up to it, we shall create a serious problem in the future for other Parliaments and other Members of Parliament.

The Government should remember that the issue is what is best for the people. What we are doing today is not good for the people of Scotland, not good for the people of Wales and certainly not good for the people of the United Kingdom.

4.36 pm

Mr. Alan Williams (Swansea, West): I begin by welcoming my right hon. and hon. Friends to the Front Bench. In particular, I congratulate the Under-Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Neath (Mr. Hain) on his maiden speech at the Dispatch Box. It was a sincere speech, and commendably brief. I hope that he will help

[Mr. Alan Williams]

to maintain such brevity on the part of others on the Front Bench and please the Back Benchers for many years to come.

I should make it clear at the start, lest there is any doubt en route, that I welcome the referendum. I have long felt that there is a wider role for the referendum in the constitutional process as a means of involving the general public. In the 1970s, I was one of those who urged on the Prime Minister the need for referendums on the Scotland and Wales Bills.

In January 1995, in a letter to the present Prime Minister, I argued that there could be no intellectual validity in the proposition that one could overturn an overwhelming, precise vote of 4:1 against a referendum on the tenuous argument that the majority of Welsh Members of Parliament happened to represent parties which had included devolution in their manifestos.

My hon. Friends' experience may be very different from mine, but in my constituency the election was not fought on the question of devolution. It was hardly an issue—the election was fought on the topics of health, education, jobs and homelessness.

I know that the reasoning about the inadequacy of the argument did not carry much weight with my hon. Friends, whom I bored with it in the Welsh group for several years. One can therefore imagine my delight, surprise and admiration for the clarity with which the Prime Minister must have advocated the case and made a convert of the present Secretary of State, almost at a stroke.

The proposed referendum is intended to be the first in a series of referendums. I want to raise questions that are—this may sound arrogant—of great importance to the House and the electorate. If government by referendum is to be part of the process, we must consider establishing some ground rules. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland referred yesterday to the process of seeking popular consent. We must maintain popular support for the process, and not frivolously turn support into cynicism and scepticism.

I listened with admiration to the remarks yesterday of my hon. Friends the Members for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Mr. Rowlands) and for Llinlithgow (Mr. Dalyell)—who also spoke on Friday—on a pre-legislative referendum. They argued that the people would not know what they would get when they voted in a referendum. My hon. Friend the Member for Llinlithgow referred to it as a pig in a poke; I contend that the animal is not that well defined: it might be a pig, a mouse or a tiger. We have no legislation to put before the electorate to allow the people to see what they would be voting for.

We will have a White Paper, but hon. Members who have been in this place for a reasonable time will know that the wording of a White Paper is not as precise as that of a Bill. That is why White Papers may be produced more rapidly. I am not being critical, but practical. The people will be voting on a measure with a looser presentation than the final legislation.

We must also recognise that there might be changes. Time and again, hon. Members have seen White Papers change when they are translated into legislation. We must also ask: if we maintain the principle of the sovereignty

of Parliament, can we rule out in advance the possibility of any changes to the Bill in Committee? In his excellent speech, my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary said that the Government will put principles in front of the public. We are asking for a vote on principle, but we know that the details can alter the principle. That is why I argue that we must know the precise terms of the measure when we ask people to vote. We do not want to create cynicism when we are giving people a chance to be involved in Government decision making.

I warn hon. Members of another potential danger—it is a legitimate difference of opinion between my hon. Friend the Minister and me, and it must be addressed. Perhaps he can reassure me about the matter. My hon. Friend has argued in the past in favour of an enabling Bill. Such legislation is easier to draft, but it means essentially that the critical decisions appear in subsequent statutory instruments. At the time of Royal Assent, not even the House will know what final shape the animal will take. I also remind hon. Members that most statutory instruments are passed without debate—when debate occurs, it lasts for no more than an hour and a half—that most are passed without a vote and that none can be amended.

I do not pretend that my view is more valid than that of anyone else, but I have another question regarding this and any future referendums. Do the Government have a duty to ensure that there is a level democratic playing field in a referendum? That may sound strange, but our manifesto commitment is not to devolve, but to let the people choose whether we should devolve. We willed the referendum and we willed that the people should have the right to decide. If we believe in the democratic process, we must believe also in the right to hear from both sides.

If the electorate is to make a decision, it must be an informed decision. I shall abide by the people's decision, whatever it may be. At present, there is a danger that each referendum could be a David and Goliath contest: with the full panoply of governmental powers, resources and the information machine on one side ranged against the relatively unsupported representations on the other. In laying the ground rules, we must consider whether we should—and, if so, how—ensure that there is a balanced presentation of each case.

That question is particularly important in relation to the media. I ask not for financial resources for the campaign, but about the rules for broadcasters. We take it for granted that certain rules of equality must apply during a general election campaign. That is quite correct, as we are asking the people to make a very important decision. The referendums will deal with major constitutional issues, so is not the argument regarding equality of time, opportunity to present a case and right of reply equally valid?

I turn now to perhaps the most sensitive issue: freedom of speech for Back Benchers. I make it clear that we all understand the limitations on freedom of voting that apply in every political party. We know also that, while there is a conscience clause that allows us to abstain, one could argue that Back Benchers cannot vote against their party. Should a tighter rule apply in referendums? In the 1970s, in the great European Community debate—the most important constitutional decision to be taken in the post-war period—every Back Benchers was allowed to

speak as he or she saw fit. Labour Back Benchers were also allowed freedom of speech during the two devolution campaigns.

At the parliamentary Labour party meeting before the general election, we endorsed a standing order that guarantees hon. Members the right to freedom of speech. I put my point in this context. I am sure that the press reports that I read last weekend were maligning, ill-intentioned and a misrepresentation, but I was somewhat concerned by suggestions that the Secretary of State for Wales had said that it would be a disciplinary matter if Labour Members dared to speak against devolution.

I took great comfort in two other reports of speeches made by the Under-Secretary, in which he told the other political parties that Labour will not govern by diktat. Will the Secretary of State confirm that that statement applies to the Labour party? I genuinely believe that the Secretary of State has been misrepresented, and I will gladly give way now so that he can clarify his position—or he may wish to do so when he replies to the debate. I would like to be sure that there was neither threat nor intention behind his remarks.

I would like to think that, for several reasons. One is that it is the way in which we normally conduct our affairs on this side of the House. Secondly, I do not want my party to appear rather to follow the leader of the Scottish nationalists, who said as a condition of his support for the Bill that he would require Labour Back-Bench Members to be gagged. I do not want my Secretary of State and my party to look, as the nationalists appear to present themselves, afraid of the power of argument.

I am genuinely puzzled by the timing of the referendum votes. Why, I wonder, is the Welsh referendum to take place after the Scottish referendum? After all, the Scots, poor devils, have two questions to answer. They have two things on which to make up their minds. We in Wales have a much simpler decision. We have only one choice, yet we need another two weeks to make up our minds. I know that the Welsh are great talkers, but we can be decisive if encouraged. There are those who are cynical—of course, I am not one of them—who might feel that the plans are designed to enable my right hon. and hon. Friends to turn to the people of Wales and say, "Scotland has its Assembly because Scotland voted for an Assembly. That being so, you must vote for an Assembly in Wales." What a way in which to launch the great Welsh experiment in a healthy democracy—in effect, Glasgow has voted for Cardiff.

If a case for devolution stands, let it stand without stage management. Give it a chance to stand or fall on its merits. Like everyone else in this place, I shall abide by the decision of the House.

4.51 pm

Sir Robert Smith (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for giving me the chance to make my maiden speech in a debate that so affects the country from which I come, and especially my constituency. West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine is a new constituency and, as one can tell from the length of the name, a creation of the boundary commission. It is not a constituency of one entity; rather it is a bringing together of several different areas.

I wish to pay tribute to the two hon. Members who previously represented parts of what is now the West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine constituency. I urge hon.

Members to try to remember the full name from time to time, and not to abbreviate it. Kincardine is an ancient area of Scotland and does not wish to be forgotten.

One of the two hon. Members who preceded me in the constituency is Mr. George Kynoch, who is no longer in this place. I pay tribute to his loyalty to the Conservative party, particularly to his loyalty as a Minister—a role which he took extremely seriously. The other hon. Member who represented part of my constituency is my hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Mr. Bruce). Many right hon. and hon. Members will be aware of his standing in this place and of his capabilities. I can say that, on the doorstep, my hon. Friend is extremely popular in the part of my constituency that he used to represent.

There has been a sea change in the attitude of the Conservative party to the debate about the direction of the future of Scotland. It is the settled will of the people of Scotland that we should have a Scottish Parliament. Indeed, it is the logical and obvious way forward.

One of the problems, however, is the lumping together of legislation. There seems to be a different debate in Wales about what should happen there and the need for a referendum to test what is happening. There is a suspicion among Liberal Democrats that we are taking part in a debate about a referendum in Scotland, not on a matter of principle, but on worries that were expressed during the build up to the general election on the effect of such considerations in England—in other words, going ahead with the policies to which the Labour party was then committed.

My colleagues and I believe that the Bill, and the delay in bringing forward the referendum, is prolonging the much-needed requirement for a Scottish Parliament, which will be able to deal with the issues that affect my constituency and the rest of Scotland.

We have seen already today the way in which the House can operate. Questions were asked about education in England and Wales, and it seems that the Labour party in government are planning to abolish nursery vouchers, yet we hear that the Government are planning to continue with the voucher scheme in Scotland. It is surprising that, when matters of principle and technicality can surely be dealt with across Departments, those involved cannot see a way of abolishing vouchers in Scotland when a way has been found of abolishing them in England. I hope that a Scottish Parliament will enable us in Scotland to deal with the issues that will have an effect on us.

In my constituency, one of the main concerns at the forefront of the electorate's mind during the general election campaign was under-investment in education. It is sad that, again today, that has not been fully taken on board by the new Government. The crisis that is affecting our schools has not been fully recognised. I hope that the Government will recognise the urgency of the problem.

Another issue that is important in my constituency is the role of the private finance initiative in the future of the health service. It is the clear will of my constituents that management and control of clinical care should not be handed over to private companies. I am sure that the Government will be able to provide some reassurance on that front.

I think of those who previously represented parts of my constituency; I have in mind Sir Russell Fairgrieve and the late Alick Buchanan-Smith. There was a time when the Conservative party could grasp the need for a Scottish

[Sir Robert Smith]

Parliament and an accountable Scottish legislature. I commend to the House an excellent book written by Dr. James Mitchell, formerly of Edinburgh university and now of Strathclyde university; entitled, "Conservatives and the Union: A Study of the Conservative party". Unfortunately, the hon. Member who borrowed it from the Library is no longer an hon. Member, and has not yet managed to return it. That being so, I do not have a copy available to me.

I would only say from past reading of the book that the Conservative party was instrumental in the creation of the Scottish Office—a tier of government that needs to be held accountable to the people it is meant to serve. If we have such a tier of government in Scotland, the process of creating democratic accountability is an obvious next step.

The Liberal Democrats are extremely important in the context of this debate. The last thing my constituents want is a Parliament dominated by one part of Scotland and one party in Scotland, which is why a fair voting system is crucial to the acceptance of a Scottish Parliament—and, presumably, a Welsh Senate—and why the Liberal Democrats have played such a crucial role in the negotiations that have led to what has been agreed by the Scottish Constitutional Convention. I hope very much that we shall have a fair voting system to the Parliament and that fair voting will be embraced. Without it, there will be no parliamentary legitimacy.

Some people in the north-east of Scotland are concerned—it is a legitimate concern—about the domination of one party in the central belt. If we do not have a Scottish Parliament, I am pretty sure that, for the next five years, decisions that bear on the north-east of Scotland and are relevant to the Scottish Office will be dominated by one party and by one part of Scotland, because the Secretary of State is very much from one party, and it has many hon. Members who will make sure that he represents their part of Scotland. That being so, I urge all parts of Scotland to embrace the need for the Parliament.

I am disappointed about the delay and hope that, in Committee, the need to amend the Bill so that we do not need a referendum for Scotland will be recognised. That would enable us to get on with the real legislation. I hope also that the need for a referendum in Wales will be accepted, where the issue has not been so developed.

I urge the House not to delay any more that which is needed in Scotland. The House has a great deal of legislation with which to cope, and many Bills that bear on Scotland, which should be scrutinised, do not, unfortunately, receive scrutiny. There are many needs for reform in Scotland that are not even considered by the House because of delays. A means of dealing with the Scottish Office and the consequences for our constituents purely and only in Scotland within a Scottish Parliament is long overdue. I urge the House, in Committee, while accepting the need for a referendum in Wales, to delete the need for a referendum in Scotland.

4.59 pm

Dr. Norman A. Godman (Greenock and Inverclyde): I hope that the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Sir R. Smith) will accept my compliments for a fine speech.

I offer my compliments to the hon. Member for Edinburgh, West (Mr. Gorrie), who also made a fine speech. It is sometimes said that doctoral candidates are awarded their doctorates for persistence. The hon. Gentleman certainly deserves to be here for his remarkable persistence and consistency in fighting Edinburgh, West.

I offer extremely belated congratulations to my right hon. and old Friend the Member for Glasgow, Anniesland (Mr. Dewar), and all of those other fine honourable fellows who adorn the Government Front Bench. I also offer my compliments to my hon. Friends who made their initial—we are supposed to call them maiden—speeches.

I promise to be brief, but I shall refer to two Scottish morning papers, which, with other papers in Scotland, are full of comments made by the governor of the Bank of Scotland in relation to constitutional changes. *The Scotsman* begins a front page article by stating:

"Scotland's senior banker yesterday warned that he saw severe risks attaching to constitutional change both in Scotland and in Europe."

No doubt that will throw the hon. Member for Rochford and Southend, East (Sir T. Taylor), whose spirited speech amused me no end, especially his slip of the tongue, because for many years he has been in opposition to the Government on numerous subjects, so why the Freudian slip? He was a very fine constituency Member for Glasgow, Cathcart, but, unfortunately, the good people of Castlemilk and elsewhere sent him elsewhere—to the deep south.

In its editorial this morning, the *Daily Record* had this to say about the senior banker:

"Bank of Scotland governor Bruce Patullo—not Portillo—

"(an Englishman) yesterday took over from where Michael Forsyth left off—raising the spectre of Tartan VAT to pay for a Scottish Parliament.

He also claimed any new tax would discourage vital investment in Scotland by UK and overseas companies.

His comments, like Michael Forsyth's before him, fail to take account of the settled will of the Scottish people"—

and, no doubt, many thousands of his bank's clients. I regret to say that I am one of them. Perhaps the time has come for me to transfer my account.

Mr. Rhodri Morgan (Cardiff, West): To the Co-op.

Dr. Godman: To the Co-operative bank, as suggested by my Welsh friend.

Mr. Patullo should remember that many clients of the Bank of Scotland voted for constitutional change. I have no doubt that there will be unintended—as well as anticipated—consequences to constitutional reform, but that should not deter us from taking this remarkable reform forward.

On referendums, my position is one of reserve, like that of my hon. Friend the Member for Dundee, East (Mr. McAllion). I believe that there are occasions when a referendum is appropriate. Let us look at the experience of the Irish Republic, where referendums are part of the constitution. I hope that the new Government there, when the Dail resumes on 7 June, will give serious thought to holding a referendum on certain articles in the constitution, but that is another matter.

Although I had initial doubts about the proposed referendum, I now fervently hope that the overwhelming majority of the people of Scotland will vote yes to both questions. I readily concede that it was not the first issue that was raised on the doorsteps of my new constituency. The issues raised were homelessness, crime on the streets, but there was an acknowledgment everywhere—I held six public meetings during the election campaign—that a Labour Government would usher in a Scottish Parliament. It was widely acknowledged that a Labour Government would honour that promise.

Mr. Edward Garnier (Harborough): Does the hon. Gentleman think it right that, in addition to Scotsmen and Welshmen, European citizens who are not United Kingdom citizens should be able to vote in a referendum that will affect the whole of the United Kingdom?

Dr. Godman: I begin by apologising to the hon. and learned Gentleman. I called him a new boy yesterday, and that was utterly unwarranted. He has in fact been here before, and he and I were in Bosnia together last year.

Of course people resident in Scotland should have the right to vote in the referendum. They have chosen to live in Scotland. They are people of Scotland.

Over the past 18 years, Scotland has been governed appallingly—in an insensitive, intolerant way. I have said to Conservative Members of Parliament that, had Mrs. Thatcher when Prime Minister offered some concessions to the desire for a degree of autonomy, the Conservatives might not be in the parlous state that they are now in. I said that over the years to Scottish and English Conservative Members of Parliament, who chose to ignore that advice. I do not speak from hindsight.

I also believe that had a Tory Government been returned at the election we would now be witnessing the beginnings of the dismemberment of the United Kingdom, because many people who voted Labour would seriously be thinking of an independent Scotland as a future for themselves, their children and grandchildren. The biggest threat to Scotland came from the Conservative party, which was so decisively defeated on 1 May.

I offer three examples of that unsupportable form of government. First, the poll tax, which was introduced into Scotland in such a heavy-handed and insensitive manner. One of the finest speeches made during the passage of the legislation that introduced the poll tax was made in the other place by the late Willie Ross. It was a superb analysis and critique of that disgraceful measure.

The second example is the reorganisation of local government. The majority of Scots did not want the abolition of the regional and district councils. I must tell Conservative Members that many people in my constituency are suffering because of the disappearance of Strathclyde regional council and its remarkable management of social work and education services in my constituency. I should declare an interest, as my wife is a member of that council. It achieved quite remarkable improvements for the lives of many people, but the Conservative Government decided to be rid of it. Mrs. Thatcher always wanted to see the end of Strathclyde regional council. The way in which the Conservative Government managed local government in Scotland is to their eternal shame.

The third example of the rotten way in which the Conservative Government sought to govern Scotland was their attempt to privatise the supply of water in Scotland.

For those of my hon. Friends who are cautious about referendums, let me remind them of the quite remarkable referendum conducted by Strathclyde regional council on that very issue. It was an astonishing return. A million people posted off their answers to that referendum and 94 per cent. said that water in Scotland should remain under local authority control. I say to my hon. Friends, not least my old hon. Friend the Member for Dundee, East, that without that astonishing referendum result, we would now have water companies in Scotland. Instead, we have a Government who are talking about bringing the management of water supplies under local authority control again.

Those are three examples of the rotten way in which the Conservative party governed Scotland. It is because of such insensitive, unsupportable government that many people want to see a Scottish Parliament.

A number of Scottish Conservative candidates will doubtless put themselves forward in the election. As I said yesterday to the hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Sir P. Cormack), I fully expect to see his son as one of the candidates. He was a fine candidate in this election. He did not stand a cat in hell's chance of defeating my hon. Friend and neighbour the Member for West Renfrewshire (Mr. Graham). Given my hon. Friend's shape, it was as well that it was not a physical clash.

But a Conservative candidate of the stature of Charlie Cormack could well be a member of the Scottish Parliament. With proportional representation, he and other Conservatives will have a good chance of securing some seats. As someone who has campaigned all his adult life for electoral reform, that is one of the features of our legislation that really thrills me. We in Scotland are to adopt a system similar to that in Germany, so the minority parties will have reasonable representation in that Parliament.

I would love to be the Minister with responsibility for fisheries in that Parliament, but that is for others to decide. Presumably, that job will be given to someone who does not know the difference between a cod and a haddock, but it is right and proper that there are Conservatives and others in that Parliament. We must not forget that 500,000 people in Scotland voted Conservative, and they do not have a single representative in the House. But if a similar proportion vote Conservative in the election to the Scottish Parliament, there will be a substantial number, albeit a minority, of Tory Members.

Therefore, I belatedly welcome the referendum. I know that we will have overwhelming support in my constituency and I look forward to the day when we have a Scottish Parliament. I am not too happy with the Royal high school. I should like to see an international architectural competition for the design of a new Parliament, but I can live with the Royal high school for five or six years at least.

5.12 pm

Mr. Ieuan Wyn Jones (Ynys Môn): I congratulate the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Sir R. Smith). I am always slightly nervous of hon. Members who address the House without a note. It is a remarkable achievement and I am sure that he will make many similar contributions to the House. There was a tinge of controversy in his contribution in that he made the case for a referendum in Wales but not in Scotland, but I think that we can leave it at that.

[Mr. Ieuan Wyn Jones]

I congratulate the Secretary of State for Wales on his appointment and I wish him well in his duties. I also congratulate the Under-Secretary of State for Wales, the hon. Member for Neath (Mr. Hain), on assuming his new responsibilities. It was a refreshing change to hear them say on their appointments and subsequently that they want to move away from the kind of tribal politics that has dominated the House for 18 years and towards a progressive, inclusive and more co-operative style of politics.

I want to make my remarks in that spirit and to reciprocate. I hope that the Secretary of State and his colleagues will accept that listening to other points of view is one thing but, on occasion, I hope and expect that they will see the merit of arguments coming from different directions. Listening is one thing, but I am sure that occasionally they will see that not only is there merit in what other people say but that it might well be acted upon.

The Government have been elected on a decisive and clear mandate, part of which is to secure constitutional change not only in Wales and Scotland but in the other place. Not only is their majority decisive, but their mandate on constitutional change is decisive. The Leader of the Opposition is as responsible for that decisive mandate as anyone else, because he made it clear during the election campaign that the constitution was at the heart of the Conservative party's manifesto. He stood on a no change manifesto, a status quo manifesto, and he was so successful that his party was wiped out in Wales and Scotland.

There is no representative of the Conservative party from Wales or Scotland in the Chamber. We shall hear from the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague), but the people of Wales will recognise that his constituency today will be not the people of Wales, but the Benches behind him. We will understand the context of his remarks.

The mood for change in Wales and elsewhere is obvious. It is all around us. We have had 18 years of a Conservative Government who have centralised power on a scale that we have not seen before. The Government constantly told us about the nanny state; the interfering state. But we now have the Thatcher state. Baroness Thatcher was as responsible as anybody for the centralisation of power in this place. This is now a powerful and dominating personality.

Currently, many people feel alienated from the democratic institutions which serve them. That was illustrated at its worst during the general election when the proportion of young voters between the ages of 18 and 24 was lower than at any other time in recent history. There is a message there. If people feel that they do not have a voice; if they feel alienated; if they feel that they have no influence over events, there is a real danger that they will channel their resources and energies in a different way. We allow that to happen at our peril.

Modern, mature and forward-looking democracies have recognised the dangers of over-centralisation and have acted decisively to check it. Different modern states in Europe have chosen different routes to achieve that. No one model is appropriate everywhere, but we in Wales are now mature enough to take this important step forward.

The Labour party believes that the setting up of the Assembly is the way forward. Others of us will argue that that body should be enhanced and its powers improved. Let me outline not only some of the reasons why we are ready to move forward but why the choice in the referendum should reflect the fact that there are different views in Wales about how we should move forward.

The first reason, often given in the Chamber and outside, is the growth of the quango state. The people of Wales find it distasteful and a negation of democracy that for 18 years a Government appointed their own to run Wales although they were decisively rejected time after time by the electorate. On no occasion did the Secretary of State, who appointed people to run our health service, our education funding councils and our training agencies, appoint people who were in tune with the aspirations of the people of Wales. He appointed people whom he knew would toe the Government line.

Secondly, we need to develop our relationship with Europe. Most people know that my party has a positive vision of that relationship. We respect the cultural and national diversity of Europe. The key to protecting cultural and national diversity within a system that is becoming more global by the minute is to ensure that decisions that affect people's lives are taken at the lowest possible level. There is a Welsh dimension and a national dimension, and we should grasp the opportunity to ensure accountable government at that Welsh level.

By strengthening our democracy at home, we strengthen our links with Europe. We need to strengthen those links at a time when regional policy is being considered in Europe and important decisions that affect our farmers are being made. An elected body in Wales should have strong links with important European institutions.

Any elected body should be robust enough to protect us from significant policy changes made in Westminster with which we profoundly disagree. The hon. Member for Greenock and Inverclyde (Dr. Godman) made an eloquent speech about what had been foisted on the people of Scotland during 18 years of Conservative rule. The problem that some of us have with the current plans for the Assembly is that if it does not have at least limited legislative powers, and if the framework for legislation remains in Westminster, it will not be robust enough to protect Wales from what happens here.

It is also important to show to the people of Wales that the Government's proposal is different from that offered in 1979. It is crucial that we understand the lessons of 1979. That was a fateful year for Wales. We have a rerun of 1979 at our peril. The Government must show that what they have on offer now is different from what was on offer in 1979.

Given that there is common ground between those of us in progressive politics who believe that the way forward is constitutional change, we should make it clear that the no vote in the referendum is for those people who want the status quo. The danger in allowing only one question in the referendum in Wales is that some of us who want the Assembly to have greater powers may be tempted to register our preference by voting no, and that would be

disastrous. If that happened, the vote would be meaningless, because the no vote would hide the votes of those who want to go that little bit further.

Mr. Martyn Jones (Clwyd, South): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Jones: No, because my contribution will be short.

There is merit, in the spirit of inclusive politics, in giving the people in Wales who want to go that step further the opportunity to do so. Our preference—we fought the election on it—is for a multi-option referendum. We may not be able to argue that point in the Chamber: we shall have to wait and see.

I ask the Government to consider giving the people of Wales the opportunity to vote on, at the very least, the legislative and tax-varying powers that are on offer in Scotland. Why not include that in the debate on the Welsh Assembly? I accept that the Government are perfectly entitled to have a referendum on the question as it is framed in the Bill, but they could include all shades of opinion on the right side—if I may put it like that—of the debate.

The Government have introduced the Bill in a spirit of co-operation and on the principle of a move towards inclusive politics. The Under-Secretary of State for Wales, the hon. Member for Neath was right to say that it may be a long time before we have another opportunity to legislate on an elected body for Wales. Some people in Wales may find it strange that, faced with the ballot paper, all they are offered is a straight choice between the Labour party's position and that of the Conservative party. There are no Conservative Members in Wales, yet its position is preserved in the Bill. The Government should accept that, by going that little stage further and including all shades of opinion in Wales, they will be able to gauge the opinion of all the people in Wales.

All of us involved in this debate who fall on the side of positive change carry a great responsibility. We know from the history books or from being Members of the House that constitutional change is a momentous task. It has often ended in failure. Our children and future generations will rightly criticise us and may find it hard to forgive us if we get it wrong now. Wales is now ready for leadership, ready to consider co-operative politics, and ready to act on the desire for change.

I accept that there are no absolute truths in this debate: we must all recognise that. We have shown that there is a way forward to accommodate all shades of opinion. I hope that the Labour party will grasp that opportunity, so that the people of Wales can vote for meaningful change. If the Government are prepared to do that, we will be content to leave it up to the people of Wales to decide what sort of body they want. I am confident that if they are given that opportunity, not only will they vote for change, but will embrace change, as a modern, mature democracy that is part of the European community of nations. I hope that the Government will respond positively.

5.27 pm

Ms Julie Morgan (Cardiff, North): I am grateful to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to make my maiden speech in this debate, which is so important to the future of Wales.

I am proud to be the first woman to be elected Member of Parliament for Cardiff, North. I am the first woman Member of Parliament in the city of Cardiff, and one of four women elected in Wales on 1 May. That is still only four women out of 40 Welsh Members, but it is four times as many as in 1992. This is the beginning of women taking their rightful place in the politics of Wales, and particularly in the Welsh Assembly; provided that we achieve a yes vote in the referendum.

Amazing as it may seem, until this election, Wales had only ever had four women Members of Parliament: Eirene White, Dorothy Rees, Megan Lloyd George and my hon. Friend the Member for Cynon Valley (Mrs. Clwyd). Dorothy Rees represented the Barry constituency for about 18 months. At that time, it included Whitchurch, Rhiwbina and Lisvane, which are now part of Cardiff, North.

Labour now holds all the Cardiff seats, for the first time for 27 years. In 1966-70, the old Cardiff, North constituency was represented by my hon. Friend the Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Mr. Rowlands), who spoke in the debate last night. It is fitting that the capital of Wales—which will be the seat of the assembly—will be wholly Labour when it is set up, subject to the Bill being passed by the House and a yes vote in the referendum.

Cardiff, North—the constituency that I now represent—is very diverse. Its northern tip is the village community of Tongwynlais, which lies in the shadow of the Taff gorge linking Cardiff to the valleys to the north. Cardiff's wealth was built on coal brought down from the valleys. It would squeeze through the Taff gorge, which contains the River Taff, the Glamorgan canal, the Taff Vale railway and the now much-widened A470.

The coal has now mainly gone, but the road to Cardiff, the A470—choked by commuter traffic—goes through the heart of my constituency. It goes through the huge motorway at Coryton, where the main east-west and north-south routes through Wales meet, and on down to the other giant interchange at Gabalfa, where the Western avenue cuts through the estates of Mynachdy and Gabalfa that lead to north Llandaff—famous for the Cow and Snuffers pub, which was much frequented by Benjamin Disraeli during his visits to Wales. Nowhere is the need for an integrated transport system more obvious than on the A470 through Cardiff, North.

Next to the Gabalfa interchange lies the Heath hospital complex. Along with the dental hospital, it has 1,000 beds and is the largest hospital complex in Europe. It is not always popular with residents, because of the parking problems. One of the best-known residents of the area near the hospital is the former Speaker of the House of Commons, Lord Tony Pandy.

Cardiff, North has a high percentage of white-collar professional workers, and 83 per cent. of its residents own their homes. Many are civil servants working in Government buildings, and many have suffered from the job insecurity that has been caused by the privatisation, contractorisation and short-term contracts that have become commonplace in public service. They are all looking for a Government who are proud of their public services and recognise the worth of their staff.

Many jobs have been lost altogether to privatisation. The Atomic Weapons Establishment in Llanishen no longer makes parts for nuclear warheads. The skills of the

[Ms Julie Morgan]

workers have sadly been dispersed to the four winds because of the failure of earlier Governments to prepare for the winding down of the defence industry by diversifying. Five hundred highly skilled precision engineers have been lost to Cardiff. Their skills could have been used positively for civilian purposes. Companies House in Gabalfa, the Inland Revenue in Llanishen, the employment services department of the Welsh Office—all those have been subjected to that policy of forced insecurity. Her Majesty's Stationery Office has been privatised and closed down.

I have already mentioned that, for a brief time, Dorothy Rees represented the villages that were incorporated into Cardiff in 1967. Whitchurch is a distinct community with a bustling high street, which was really the battleground of the recent general election campaign. On Saturday mornings, I would contest the space on the high street with my opponent, Gwilym Jones. Gwilym Jones was the Member of Parliament for Cardiff, North for 14 years, living in the ward of Lizvane and St Mellons—which, incidentally, has the only Conservative member of Cardiff city council. Gwilym Jones rose to the rank of junior minister in the Welsh Office in the last Parliament after many years of public service, both as a city councillor and as a Member of Parliament.

As I said earlier, I am pleased to speak in the debate on the referendum for devolution. I campaigned strongly for devolution in my election campaign, and held a packed public meeting in Rhiwbina—which is the garden suburb in northern Cardiff—wholly devoted to the subject.

I believe that it is important for the practical benefits of a Welsh Assembly to be spelled out in the course of our campaign for a yes vote. We no longer want the people of Wales to have to put up with a standard of living that is 17 per cent. lower than the British average. We no longer want the incidence of heart disease and breast cancer to be greater in Wales than in the rest of Britain. We no longer want the poverty of aspiration that affects so many people in Wales, where a recent survey of women on benefits showed that seven out of 10 considered that they would be worse off, or no better off, if they took a job, and where the increase in child care facilities that can unlock the door to opportunity have passed the lower income groups by.

By bringing government closer to the people, a Welsh Assembly will be able to take the lead in tackling the practical issues that face people every day in Wales. In a country of 3 million people, we can get to grips with those issues. We can have a child care strategy that targets those most in need, and can come up with solutions that are unique to Wales and will tackle specifically Welsh issues.

Devolution is about people-friendly, women-friendly policies. It is not for constitutional lawyers or for politicians; its purpose is to make a real difference to the lives of all the people in Wales. With a yes vote in the referendum, we will be able to achieve that.

5.34 pm

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (North Essex): I congratulate the hon. Member for Cardiff, North (Ms Morgan) on her maiden speech. It was a model of its kind, in which she not only described her constituency, paying tribute to her predecessor Gwilym Jones—whom all Conservative

Members remember fondly—but put down a marker in expressing the hope that the policies that she supports will truly benefit the people whom she has been sent here to represent. That is a good start for any new Member.

There are a huge number of fundamental questions for the Government to answer, concerning the very nature of the devolution proposals, before we get near to the detail of the actual legislation. There are questions about the stability of the Barnett formula, about the tartan tax—how Scots could raise extra income tax, or even cut income tax, without creating new tensions between the Scots and the English, on whom Scottish public spending is so dependent—and about the inequality of representation and powers among Scottish, Welsh and English Members of Parliament.

Those and other issues need to be dealt with. They were largely responsible for undermining the credibility of the 1978 proposals. Dealing with them is vital to the stability of the arrangements, and, ultimately, to the stability of the United Kingdom, but they have yet to be answered by the Government. No wonder they call devolution in Scotland unfinished business.

With such Labour dominance in both Scotland and Wales, there is a great temptation for Government supporters to regard the questions raised about the Bill and its two offspring as somehow irrelevant. That will be a constant danger for the Government: they will rely on the size of their majority, rather than on the force of their arguments. No doubt we Conservatives used to do the same, but that simply reinforces the point that great majorities are a threat to the quality of legislation.

For example, it has been asked regularly throughout the debate on what basis the discredited and reduced number of Conservative Members representing entirely English constituencies can raise such questions at all. Leaving aside the half a million voters in Scotland who did vote Conservative, let us start from first principles. The ultimate sovereignty of the Scottish and Welsh peoples is a fact. Whatever the niceties of international law, Scotland and Wales can claim the right of self-determination if that is what they want; but, in speech after speech, supporters of devolution tell the House that they are fervent supporters of the Union. Indeed, yesterday the Secretary of State for Scotland specifically rejected the suggestion that there should be a third question in the Scottish referendum to give voters the option to reaffirm their support for the Union. He said that that would imply that those who are going to vote yes in a referendum are the enemies of the United Kingdom.

It is for exactly the same reason that the plea of the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Mr. Jones) that some other options should be put in the referendum will be rejected by Ministers. It opens up the whole argument about where the process is actually leading. If I may say so to the Secretary of State for Scotland: if the cap fits, wear it.

The argument often promulgated by proponents of devolution—we have heard it today—is that a Scottish Parliament would have blocked the poll tax. The pros and cons of the poll tax are not the issue here; the question is whether a Scottish Parliament will behave as though it had a mandate superior to that of the Parliament here at Westminster. During the election campaign, the Prime Minister set the record straight. With his customary lack of tact in regard to Scottish affairs, he said, "Sovereignty will rest with me, as an English Member of Parliament."

The Prime Minister's underlying statement is, of course, right. All parts of the United Kingdom are subject to the absolute sovereignty of Parliament. That is what it is to be part of the United Kingdom. To enact a policy that questions that truth is to question the very basis of the whole constitution of the Union. The very idea of something called a Scottish Parliament is anathema to the concept of the union of the Parliaments. This, here, is Scotland's Parliament. If Scotland wants its own Parliament again, the union of the Parliaments is effectively ended.

A Scottish Parliament which, as some people expect, will challenge the mandate of Westminster in Scotland, and which will be based upon the Claim of Right of the Scottish people to self-government, will be based principally on nationalistic principles. Therein lies our claim that this schizophrenic arrangement is set to destabilise the Union between Scotland and England and that between Wales and England.

How will that happen in practice? Conflict between Westminster and Edinburgh is inevitable, not least over the mechanism for calculating how much the English taxpayer should continue to support Scottish public expenditure. Tensions and disputes are currently resolved behind the closed doors of Cabinet unity. They are set to burst into the open. If the arrangement works well, the demand will be for more powers to be transferred. If it seems not to work, the excuse will be that it needs more powers. Success or failure—either way the demand will be, "Give us more powers."

The extent and legitimacy of Scottish representation at Westminster will be increasingly questioned. The scene will be set for the breakdown of the settlement between Scotland and England that has provided such benefits to both countries for hundreds of years. That is why the process sets a sickly smile on the faces of the nationalists. They know that a Scottish Parliament will be the mother of the separatism that they seek.

It is extraordinary that the Bill should be the first one that the new Government should present, and it betrays the reality of the Government. The new Labour Government are brimming with optimism and self-confidence. They are ready for any challenge to their considerable mandate and are prepared to brush aside the time-consuming irritations presented by Her Majesty's Opposition. Their programme is long on aspiration, but they are depressingly short on policy specifics in the areas where specifics are so sorely needed.

A windfall tax, a training scheme and the abolition of the assisted places scheme hardly inspire or will transform the country. Bravado and press releases are no substitute for substantive policies. Just getting the Tories out will not solve the problems of crime, insecurity at work or deficient public services. The twin icebergs of public expenditure control and our European partners' federalist intentions are two great obstacles blocking the way of the new ship of state. The officers on the bridge carry on their task with dash and with the certainty that they are unsinkable, but the thinness of their real policies will be torn like the plates of the Titanic. Their riveting sound bites, hammered so lovingly, will snap and the cold water of reality will rush in.

Let us hope for better, but there is little sign of a real five-year Government programme. Instead, this whole Parliament is set to be dominated by changes to the

constitution, but this drive does not come from the ordinary voter. As the hon. Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) said, even in Scotland and Wales few voters place devolution at the top of their list of priority issues. No number of extra politicians in Edinburgh and Cardiff will shorten health service waiting lists, or create jobs, except for the politicians themselves, who will increase their expense accounts and the number of their hangers-on.

The real drive of the Government's proposals comes from the party interest and not the national interest. The programme is designed to gerrymander the constitution in the interests of the Labour party and its acolytes. It is born not out of high principle, but out of the sheer frustration of being out of office for 18 years.

Mr. Thomas Graham (West Renfrewshire): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Jenkin: I shall finish the point and then give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Rather than blame themselves for nearly two decades of exile, Labour Members blamed the system and have found themselves elected and determined to change it. Islington-based Ministers now grappling with the real questions of government who heard the hon. Member for Linlithgow on Friday and yesterday should now wish that some of the baggage from opposition had been left behind on the Opposition Benches.

Mr. Graham: The hon. Gentleman spoke about gerrymandering. Not long ago, Scotland was subjected, by a Tory Government, to one of the biggest gerrymandering exercises that was ever forced on it. That was the gerrymandering of local government. The Tory Government gerrymandered boundary changes and pushed out of the road one of our most successful local authorities, Strathclyde. We should not have to listen to a Tory who probably did not take part in any of the Scottish debates talking about us being gerrymandered out of the door. The people of Scotland will not have gerrymandering. Our referendum will be debated publicly and the people will have the right to put their cross on a ballot paper.

Mr. Jenkin: I fail to understand why I am of the least concern to the hon. Gentleman. I am one of a thin number of Conservative Members. All we have are arguments, and if I can excite the hon. Gentleman to such an extent, I can only conclude that my arguments cause him some anxiety.

In Scotland, as in Wales, the real reason for the devolution policy is that Labour despaired of being elected with a majority in Westminster. Now that there is a Labour Government, the need for a Labour-dominated Parliament in Edinburgh has passed. Only the nightmare of the commitment to proceed remains. What exactly are the decisions that will be delegated to the proposed Scottish Parliament that cannot be delegated to the Scottish Grand Committee, except the power to raise the tartan tax? It is that and the greater permanence of Labour domination that has hooked the Administration on the commitment, and all this came as a dawning realisation on the new Labour leadership.

The questions are unanswerable, the scheme is illogical, the resulting mess will be unstable, and the tartan tax is the only feature that distinguishes this mess from the mess

[Mr. Jenkin]

that helped to scupper the last Labour Government. That is why we are here now. New Labour's answer to all that was to present the Bill for two-question referendums in Scotland and in Wales to try to draw the sting out of the illogicality of it all. There can be little doubt that new Labour, Islington Labour, would like to drop devolution—it is a hangover from the old Labour party, and the tartan tax runs counter to all the messages on tax that new Labour transmits—but they could not, because new Labour and Scottish Labour are deeply divided.

Scottish Labour hates nothing more than the smiling face of the Minister without Portfolio, and it seethes against the spending caps imposed by London new Labour. Scottish Labour is old Labour and chafes against its new master in Downing street. That is what drives the devolution policy—Scottish Labour versus new Labour. Ironically, the sticking plaster of the referendum policy that was conceived by new Labour in London to heal the breach was the final insult to Scottish Labour. One minute the Secretary of State for Defence was arguing passionately for Scottish self-government and against a referendum, and the next he was submissively accepting the diktat from London that his policy had been changed. That was followed shortly afterwards by the resignation of the hon. Member for Dundee, East (Mr. McAllion) from his shadow post.

A Scottish Parliament and a Welsh Assembly are but two of Labour's seven major proposed constitutional changes. It also wants regional English assemblies, including a new Greater London council and a Bill to incorporate the rulings of the European Commission of Human Rights directly into United Kingdom law, giving power to another set of European judges to tell us what to do. Those are political questions that should be decided democratically in this Parliament. Labour proposes a Bill to reform the House of Lords, a commission on proportional representation for Westminster and, of course, a new European Communities (Amendment) Bill to transfer yet more decisions from Westminster to Brussels.

Those are the seven pillars of unwisdom, the seven veils to cover the true nakedness of Labour's programme for government. They are the seven deadly sins that the Government intend wilfully to commit against our present political stability and prosperity. Most of the damage that a majority party can do to the economy, to public services, to business and commerce and even to foreign policy is reversible, or at least repairable. However, the guardianship of our constitution is an inalienable trust which a Government should never betray. It is like the quality of our environment and the preservation of our natural heritage. Any damage done there is irreversible. Once destroyed, institutions and relationships are irretrievable. That is why the decisions on these issues are so absolutely crucial.

Therefore, I plead that we take the two great measures that will follow this one on the Floor of the House in a Committee of the whole House so that we can consider them fully and absolutely, as all constitutional measures should be considered. The House should take note of how the Secretary of State prevaricated on that question. Why will he not give the same assurance for the Scotland and Wales Bills as he has given for this Bill? Does he think

that they are somehow less important or less constitutional, or does he have some tortuous new logic that he feels will entitle the Government to manoeuvre its huge majority like tanks on Salisbury plain? Is he suggesting that a referendum—held in only parts of the United Kingdom and, moreover, held in the heady honeymoon of a new Government and before the final, amended terms of the proposals are known—is a substitute for proper parliamentary scrutiny?

The Secretary of State speaks of the need for

"a broadly based consensus for change."—[Official Report, 21 May 1997; Vol. 294, c. 720.]

The Bill invites the Scots and Welsh to lunge at an unconsidered, ill-thought-out false panacea that will lead to the disillusion and dissolution which I know that he sincerely wishes to avoid. So why the rush? The Secretary of State opines:

"The measure is a deceptively simple one."—[Official Report, 21 May 1997; Vol. 294, c. 715.]

Its simplicity is indeed the method of its deception. The Government's business managers have seen the dangers. Genuine extended debate on these great issues would be the Government's Maastricht. The facade of party unity would quickly fracture. The Government are like fugitives scuttling across the strand at low water in the twilight, anxious to reach the far shore before the tide of reality comes in.

In 1945, the Select Committee on Procedure gave the House clear protection. The Committee contained such luminaries as Sidney Silverman, Dick Crossman, Hugh Gaitskell and Maurice Webb. At least we can say that old Labour recognised the constitutional and parliamentary proprieties. The Committee recorded the then Government's commitment never to prevent any Bill of first-class constitutional importance from being taken in Committee on the Floor of the House. It even gave examples:

"for instance of the Bill for the Parliament Act 1911, or the Statute of Westminster 1931."

The new Labour Government appear ready to set about our constitution with all the subtlety of a General Pinochet, who achieved a great deal by referendum. For a Conservative, at least our constitution is the basic foundation of our nation, of our prosperity and of our society—

Ms Rosemary McKenna (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Jenkin: I am just winding up. I am obviously winding the hon. Lady up.

All constitutions reflect history, whether written or unwritten. They are established over time or by revolution. The constitution defines the nature and character of its country, of the people that it governs. Our constitution is unique. It is the living archive of every historic event that has occurred in these islands for at least 1,000 years. That is what my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition was referring to when he mentioned the thousand years of British history. To assert that Britain did not exist until the Act of Union sounds a little Scotocentric, if I may say so.

Our modern constitution has served us all remarkably well. It has supported the stability and strength of the nation through the days of empire, the reform and

extension of the franchise, the years of relative decline and two world wars to today's prosperous and outward-looking nation. It has protected the freedom of the people through periods when, elsewhere in the world, freedom and democracy not long ago seemed to have become a passing fancy.

Our historic constitution, from the monarch to the parish council, is fundamentally our country and our nation. It is the essence of what it is to be English, Scottish or Welsh and British. It truly is the United Kingdom. It was our birthright when we inherited it and it should be for our children to inherit.

Whether one venerates the blood shed by cavalier or by roundhead, Jacobite or Hanoverian, spitfire pilot or the miner down the pit, their separate sacrifices are our single precious inheritance. We squander it at our peril, and the contempt of the Government for that history underlies the great betrayal that they are about to commit on this country.

5.54 pm

Mrs. Anne McGuire (Stirling): I thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to make my first speech in the House in this historic debate on the referendums for a Scottish Parliament and a Welsh Assembly. Having listened to the hon. Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin), it is somewhat ironic that I stand here representing the constituency of Stirling. I offer my congratulations to other hon. Members who have made their first speech this afternoon. Before I embark on some comments on the Bill, I should like to make a few preliminary and traditional remarks.

First, I place on record my thanks to hon. Members and officers of the House who have greatly assisted me in the bewildering transition from the outside world. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld and Kilsyth (Ms McKenna), I have been exposed to the undoubted wit of the London cabby, one of whom told me that he did not know how a married woman could make a maiden speech. As we say in Scotland, "He'll ken noo."

I have also been overwhelmed by some of the accolades that have been thrown my way since I was elected some three weeks ago, not least that of being made an honorary vice-president of the Glasgow university shinty club. I understand that my one perk, which I shall of course declare in the Register of Members' Interests, is that I am allowed to play for the team.

I should like to record my own tribute to my predecessor, Michael Forsyth. I have a confession to make. Like many other hon. Members on both sides of the House, I suspect, I have struggled to find words adequate to describe the previous Member of Parliament for Stirling. He was a man of many talents, a self-confessed political Houdini, who excited great emotion in Scotland and beyond. He was undoubtedly a consummate politician who rarely shied away from controversy and he pursued issues as he saw them. He also acknowledged the tension in his relationship with many Scots.

Although I do not share Michael Forsyth's political beliefs and regret many of the policies that his party implemented, I recognise that in the House he was an assiduous, diligent and effective Member of Parliament for Stirling. He also had a sense of humour, which, it must be said, sometimes was self-deprecating. Some 18 months

before the election he told me that we would both have fun on the campaign trail. I am not sure whether his idea of fun was for me to stand here and for him not to. As an opponent, I found him unfailingly courteous and I am pleased to acknowledge his generous words to me on the morning of 2 May when the result was announced. I wish him and his family well in whatever the future holds for them.

I am also pleased to recognise the debt that I owe to Harry, now Lord, Ewing, who represented Stirling town until the boundaries were redrawn in 1983. Lord Ewing is still remembered by the good folk of the town as a man of courtesy and integrity.

I am privileged to have a number of my constituents here in the House of Commons, including my hon. Friends the Members for Falkirk, East (Mr. Connarty), and for Glasgow, Baillieston (Mr. Wray) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Hamilton, South (Mr. Robertson). I have to advise them now, however, that if they have constituency problems on which they wish to consult me, they can queue up like everyone else on a Friday evening.

I know that I will vie with other hon. Members if I claim that my constituency is one of the most beautiful in Britain, but, in all honesty, Stirling is. It is also an area of deep historical significance. The town that gives its name to the constituency is dominated by the impressive Stirling castle, a fortified rock that goes back into the mists of time. The castle is surrounded by buildings of note such as the Church of Holy Rude and the Argyll Lodges. It is no wonder that the town, which is the traditional gateway to the highlands, is at the centre of an expanding tourist industry. Full credit must be given to the partnership between the Labour local authority and the tourist board for developments in the area.

The constituency stretches over 800 square miles, from Tyndrum and Crianlarich in the north to the villages of Strathblane, Balfour, Drymen and Killearn in the west and onwards to the famous bonny banks of Loch Lomond. It also includes the Trossachs. As my hon. Friend the Member for Greenock and Inverclyde (Dr. Godman) said, within the Trossachs is Loch Katrine, which is a monument to Victorian values—the Victorian values that recognised that there was public good in providing a free and efficient water supply to the industrial town of Glasgow. Those are the Victorian values that we should applaud.

As well as being an area of outstanding historical and cultural distinction, the constituency is home to rural communities that are struggling to alleviate disadvantage and communities that are trying to restore hope and optimism for the future. Communities such as Raploch will undoubtedly benefit from the Government's welfare to work programme. The Stirling area also has one of the highest percentages in Scotland of those earning below £2.50 an hour. On behalf of the low-paid in my constituency, I welcome the commitment to introduce a national minimum wage.

I must also note that the constituency contains the small city of Dunblane. That community was visited by such tragedy on 13 March 1995 that it is still difficult fully to comprehend its emotional impact. On behalf of the parents, families and the wider community of Dunblane, I welcome the Government's intention to extend the ban on handguns.

[Mrs. Anne McGuire]

The area in and around Stirling is steeped in Scottish history. Rob Roy McGregor is buried in the village of Brig o' Turk. At Bannockburn, Robert the Bruce defeated the English horsemen of King Edward as they got bogged down in the marsh made even more soggy by Scotland's excellent June weather. Later this year in Stirling, we will celebrate the 600th anniversary of the battle of Stirling bridge, where Sir William Wallace, the one who did not have an Australian accent or blue woad on his face, inflicted yet another defeat on our English neighbours.

We have moved on since then. The area saw so much bloodshed in earlier and more turbulent times as we tried to come to terms with the fact that we all shared this small island. As its democratic representative, I am privileged and pleased to be here to offer my support for the Bill, which will pave the way for the development of a Scottish Parliament. That will be a monumental development in the country's constitution.

I do not expect the current Secretary of State to don a tartan plaid and to put blue woad on his face to lead the yes-yes campaign. In its own way, however, the establishment of a Scottish Parliament is about being brave hearted. It is about recognising the sentiments and aspirations of the people in Scotland to move towards a more modern and decentralised government for this country.

The Scottish people have consistently shown that they do not want separation. The results on 1 May only underlined the fact that the nationalists have lost the 15 general elections since the second world war. The people in Scotland want something different from and better than what the status quo offers them.

My predecessor in Stirling mounted a political campaign and built a reputation as the so-called guardian of the Union. He saw himself as a knight in shining armour who was trying to save the Scottish people from themselves. He challenged the assertion that the Scottish people wanted a Parliament and, with Conservative colleagues, he threatened political mayhem in the new Parliament if subsequent legislation for that Parliament was made on the basis of a general election mandate. They claimed that the aspiration for a Scottish Parliament was more to do with the fevered imagination of Labour and Liberal Democrat politicians than the

"settled will of the Scottish people".

Well, the Scottish Parliament will be anchored by a distinct positive decision of the people of Scotland. It will be secured by their consent as well as its ability to vary tax. The referendum will give the House the clear unequivocal answer to those who challenge the aspirations of people in Scotland to have greater autonomy over their domestic political agenda. It will further ensure that the new Parliament will not become a political hostage to those who think that they know better. Those people were so woefully out of touch with the Scottish and Welsh people that they suffered complete electoral humiliation on 1 May.

The Bill will be a springboard to a Scottish Parliament, a devolved Parliament within the partnership of the United Kingdom. It will lift this country's constitution into the 21st century. It will be the realisation of a dream for so many, not least my right hon. Friend the Secretary

of State for Scotland. It will strengthen the partnership of the United Kingdom, because it will be solidly anchored by the positive consent of the Scottish people.

A Parliament that has confidence in itself should have the confidence to give away some of its power because it should recognise that its legitimacy and strength come from meeting the aspirations of its people and not by crushing them. I am pleased to offer my support to the Bill.

6.5 pm

Mr. Andrew George (St. Ives): I thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to make my maiden speech. I congratulate hon. Members on the quality of their maiden speeches, which I shall try to match.

I should like to take this opportunity to make a bit of history by saying:

"Me am beth hanow

Heb dewath ha bry

Bisgwethack rag nevra"

Those words are Cornish. They were spoken by a blacksmith from St. Keverne, in my constituency, where I come from.

That blacksmith was known locally as "An Gof", which is Cornish for the smith, and was called Michael Joseph. He led an uprising from the constituency just one month short of 500 years ago. This weekend, that uprising will be re-enacted when a large band of Cornish people will march 330 miles to London to celebrate and commemorate the Cornishmen's storming of London. Sadly, that attack was not as successful as we would have liked.

Mr. Alex Salmond (Banff and Buchan): There will be a better result this time.

Mr. George: Yes, that is what I intend.

Michael Joseph, "An Gof", marched to London with a band of 15,000 Cornishmen. Sadly, he was summarily hanged, drawn and quartered and dragged through the streets of this city.

In defiance of the then King, he said, roughly translated:

"I shall have a name perpetual and a fame permanent and immortal."

To prove that, the celebration of that uprising will start from my constituency at the weekend. It will be an important commemoration for us. I believe that I am supposed to mention my predecessors on this occasion—the then local Member, William Antron, supported the rebellion. In 1508, the Charter of Pardon, resulting from the rebellion, gave the Cornish Parliament the right to allow or disallow

"any Statute, Act, ordinance, provision, restraint or proclamation . . . made by the King, his heirs, successors, or the Prince of Wales, the Duke of Cornwall, or their council."

That charter represented an accommodation of the distinctiveness of Cornwall.

I have chosen to make my maiden speech in this debate because I want to support those who recognise the distinctiveness of those parts of these lands that take pride in their heritage and culture. That sentiment binds the people together across the whole of our land.

When the Liberal Democrats won the St. Ives seat earlier this month, it was one of the last results to be announced. I pointed out that, with our result, it became clear that, for the first time, the traditional Celtic nations of Scotland, Wales and Cornwall were not represented by a single Conservative Member.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): A Tory-free zone.

Mr. George: Yes, indeed.

Perhaps the Conservatives are now reconsidering their traditional opposition to electoral reform in those nations. A number of speakers have already ably argued that.

The general election marked the retirement of the former Member for St. Ives, David Harris. I was delighted to pay him a warm tribute when the result was announced and I am pleased to have the opportunity to repeat it today. Many people know that he retired in tragic circumstances. He was regarded with warmth and deep respect by hon. Members on both sides of the House. Since my election to the House, I have had conversations with older, long-standing Members and their respect and warm regard for him has come across strongly. He was a hard-working constituency Member of Parliament, and he will be remembered in the constituency as a gracious and honourable man. I offer him my best wishes for his future.

There are many parallels between the St. Ives constituency and the other Celtic nations mentioned today. The constituency stretches from the most southerly point of Great Britain at the Lizard to the Land's End peninsula and across to the Isles of Scilly. It includes St. Michael's Mount. Even with the important towns of Helston, Penzance, Hayle, St. Ives, St. Just, Porthleven and Marazion, it is a largely rural constituency. It is, of course, renowned for its scenery, its beaches and its occasional sunshine. Its traditional industries of farming and fishing are still very important to the area. Unfortunately, the last two mines at Geevor closed 10 years ago.

The constituency is well known as a holiday destination. I would wager—and this is not an offer of cash for questions—that the whole House would agree that west Cornwall and Scilly are among the most attractive places in these lands.

Alongside—or, perhaps, despite—the beauty of the area, however, Cornwall is becoming renowned for its poverty and deprivation. It has had the lowest wages in the country and among the highest levels of unemployment anywhere. Even while unemployment was allegedly falling in other parts of the country, it was and still is rising in Cornwall. It is an area that has suffered a great deal of deprivation and faced enormous problems. The Under-Secretary of State for Wales, the hon. Member for Neath (Mr. Hain), came to speak to some of the workers at St. Ivel because the closure of the factory will have an enormous impact on unemployment in the area. It is an issue on which I shall be working hard in the coming weeks and months.

The area also has a deep-seated housing problem for local people, with high levels of second-home ownership hand in hand with high levels of homelessness and a lack of affordable housing.

Like Scotland and Wales, Cornwall is known for its strong sense of belonging, of community and of place. If the total contribution of our existence on this planet were

to measured purely in the profit and loss accounts, Bills and debates such as this would be pointless and there would be little point in defending the interests of places such as Cornwall. If a national audit were all about measuring the value of pride, despite the depths of adversity Cornwall and Scilly would be one of the most wealthy places in these islands.

Even now, there are pressures on all places—especially Cornwall—to lose their identity and pride. To paraphrase, Matthew Arnold once said that it is inevitable that a centralised kingdom will work to render its dominion homogeneous. That is what I think the debate today is all about; it is to keep the differences and to celebrate and encourage the diversity in this land.

In the case of Cornwall—and no doubt Wales and Scotland—a place that was once so distinctive is under threat of becoming indistinguishable from everywhere else. But whether or not one was born in Cornwall—and this no doubt applies to Scotland, England and Wales as well—many people come to the area and recognise its importance and strength. They get involved in the local community, which we welcome. It is a broad and welcoming community, which celebrates diversity within it as well as diversity in the nation as a whole.

Of course, the Cornish character is deeply egalitarian. If someone gets a little bit uppity, the Cornish are always swift to put him in his place and delight in doing so. Therefore, as a Cornishman born and brought up in the constituency—I have worked there and my wife is from there—I am immensely proud to have been elected as the constituency's representative. It is a great honour to be its Member of Parliament. There is nowhere else on earth that I would rather represent.

During my travels around the constituency, both before and during the election, I met a large number of people. Early in the campaign, a cousin of mine came up to me and said, "Well, I don't suppose you could do worse than that shower." I guess that by "that shower" he was referring to the Conservative Members sitting to my right. By Cornish standards, it was praise indeed; by my cousin's standards, it was the highest accolade known to man. Such is the level of accolade in Cornwall.

When touring the constituency during the election, I would try to stop and chat to as many people as possible. I would often be greeted with, "Yeaau Pard, woz on eh?"—which translated means, "Good day my very good friend and most esteemed colleague. How on earth are you? Please tell me what has been going on in your life lately, if you don't mind me being so bold as to ask." It loses a lot in the translation. One conversation that I remember well at St. Just not so long ago went, "Where have you been lately?" The answer was, "I've been off on a world tour." "Well," he was asked, "where exactly have you been?" The reply was, "Well, I have taken in Trewellard, Pendeen, and Botallack."

With Cornish people—no doubt it is the same countrywide, especially in Scotland and Wales—there is always a self-mocking irony and a dry sense of humour. But there is also an intense stoicism, which is often needed to survive the problems of living in an austere environment and poor economy.

My first impression on coming to the House was that it seemed so far removed from the real world of west Cornwall. I have come here to represent that area, not to

[Mr. George]

be drafted in to represent the chosen party in Cornwall. That is an important point that needs to be taken on board. It is what I am determined to do.

Cornwall, like Scotland and Wales, has accepted second best for far too long. The passion and fire of Michael Joseph in the past needs to be rekindled today for the future. There is a fire for a new beginning; there will be new hope. We need a new start and we are making new demands.

During the campaign and the march to London, demands will be made: for recognition of Cornwall's special cultural, historic, linguistic and constitutional status; the case for a Cornish Assembly; the overwhelming case for a powerful Cornish development agency; the desperate need to establish a university college in Cornwall; and the case for a fair deal for Cornish residents on water bills, housing, economic development aid, policing and education.

While Scotland has the West Lothian question, which is constantly answered in various ways, Cornwall has the Trelawny question:

"And shall Trelawny live or shall Trelawny die,

There's 20,000 Cornish folk who'll know the reason why."

I believe that we will ensure that Trelawny will not die. That is what our party believes. I shall be working to persuade hon. Members that Trelawny must not die in the months and years ahead. Cheers.

6.17 pm

Mr. Donald Anderson (Swansea, East): I stand amazed and delighted at the eloquence of those hon. Members who have made their maiden speeches today. I recall how frozen I was when I made mine. Today there has been a promise of even greater to come.

I also stand amazed at the reactionary speech of the hon. Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin), who seemed to be ready to fight against any reform until it becomes a tradition. I remind him that his paean of praise for the constitution is ill placed because the genius of our constitution is that it is not static, but evolves in accordance with the wishes of the people at the time. There has been a bar on constitutional advance for 18 years. That is why there is a need to get on speedily with constitutional change.

I was delighted by the speech of the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Mr. Jones). He warned me in advance that there would be a change of rhetoric. I am pleased that Plaid Cymru has recognised that this is a chance in a generation. The giant step is to have an Assembly. Once it is there, it will move as far and as fast as the people of Wales want. That is the key step. It is why the forces of progress will be on one side in the referendum, working together, while the Conservative forces—who have been chased from Wales—will be on the other side. That will be the real decision.

I believe that I am the only remaining member of the gang of six Welsh Labour Members who argued against the Labour Government's devolution proposals in the 1970s. I shall support the present Government's proposals; I shall support them in the referendum and do what I can to persuade people to accept them. I shall not go into the reasons for my change—[*Interruption.*] I shall

give the headlines. Part of the reason is Thatcherite centralisation; part of the reason involves Europe; part of the reason involves my wish to have the identities of Wales and Scotland recognised. I can expand on those reasons, but not tonight.

I am in favour of devolution. I am wary of referendums in principle, because they have a rather dubious history. Mitterrand said that the French always answer the wrong question, which is certainly true. The relevance of that is that, in 1979, the referendum in Wales was lost, partly because the Government who proposed it were unpopular at the time; we are now in a different context. The outcome of a referendum depends, in part, on who poses the question and the nature of the question. I concede that we are now in a honeymoon period and the situation is set fairer than before.

Another of my objections to referendums is that they are, by their very nature, inflexible. One cannot negotiate with the people—as the Danes found out when they had to put the question on Maastricht twice when they did not like the answer to the first question. Having said that, I believe that we must have a referendum on the Government's proposals now, for two reasons.

First, the precedent was set in 1979 and it would be absurd for us to overturn that decisive position. Secondly, in my judgment, although the people cannot pronounce on every detail of a Bill, they can express a mood. I believe that the current mood in Wales and, I am informed, in Scotland, is decisively in favour of change. A referendum will assist in the legislative process because, if hon. Members try to wreck the Bill, they can be reminded that it has been broadly endorsed by the people, which should clear any doubt.

I end, partly because I promised that I would end soon, with just two caveats—this Labour Member, like a Labour Government, keeps promises. First, from my own knowledge of Wales, I know that the outcome of the referendum in Wales is by no means a foregone conclusion. I shall certainly do what I can on the platform to ensure that there is a positive vote. Secondly, I concede that there are enormous problems of principle in having decentralisation—devolution—in a unitary state. We are travelling uncharted waters and many areas of principle should be rigorously tested.

Let no one imagine that this is a final station; it is no more than an interim solution. It may be that, rationally, we shall be persuaded to go further along a federal path—that is a debate for another day. For this day, this argument is enough. If people want to adopt the proposal, let us debate it rigorously and properly. I shall stand with the Government on the platform for the referendum and for devolution.

6.23 pm

Mr. William Hague (Richmond, Yorks): We have had an interesting debate over the past day and a half. What a good job that there were a few minutes for the hon. Member for Swansea, East (Mr. Anderson) to make his speech, and to say that it would be good if the principles were properly tested in debate and that, if people had an opportunity to think about these matters rationally, they might do something different. His words revealed something important about the Bill—something on which I intend to concentrate in the minutes available to me.

The debate has been graced by a number of maiden speeches, including those from the hon. Members for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Sir R. Smith),

for Cardiff, North (Ms Morgan) and for St. Ives (Mr. George), who had an endearing way of saying cheers at the end of his speech. I am not sure whether that will become a tradition in the House.

The hon. Member for Stirling (Mrs. McGuire) also made her maiden speech. Many Conservative Members will appreciate the tribute that she paid to the courtesy, humour and dignity of Michael Forsyth, her predecessor. Her speech and that of the hon. Member for Cumbernauld and Kilsyth (Ms McKenna) yesterday explain why we meet so many traumatised cabbies in London at the moment: confrontations between Scottish Members of Parliament and the taxi drivers of London are turning into something to be believed.

The Leader of the House, the right hon. Member for Dewsbury (Mrs. Taylor), said during business questions today that not too much time need be spent on the Bill, because it was simple and straightforward. It is a simple Bill in terms of the amount of paper that it occupies, but it is not simple or straightforward in its implications.

In a memorable speech yesterday, the hon. Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) said that awkward, difficult questions had to be faced. The difficulty for the House is that awkward and difficult questions have been asked in the debate, but they have not been answered by the Government. The Secretary of State for Wales will have an opportunity in a moment to answer those questions.

The hon. Member for Linlithgow asked important questions. He asked what he now calls the Bury, North question, about how Scottish Members can continue to be elected by 55,000 voters, but English Members by 68,000 voters. He recognises that the Bill has implications for England—something that the Government seem to want to deny. It is not possible, and it is not wise, to ignore completely the implications for England and the United Kingdom of the measures that the Government are now proposing.

The hon. Member for Neath (Mr. Hain), the new Under-Secretary of State for Wales, opened our proceedings today—

Mr. Salmond: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Hague: No, I shall not give way, as I wish to go a little further—I am still on my opening remarks, and congratulating the hon. Member for Neath on his maiden speech from the Front Bench.

The hon. Gentleman made an interesting speech, in which he seemed to say that, whatever people's views on the sort of Assembly or Parliament that should be set up, they could vote yes in the referendums planned by the Government. He seemed to say to the electorate, "Here are the proposals that we want you to approve," while at the same time giving a nod and a wink to everyone that the whole thing could be changed afterwards if they wanted to do so.

People will want to ask why the Government do not have the courage to say, "Here are our proposals, which have been tested by detailed scrutiny and debate—now you can accept or reject them as you wish." I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his speech, but he will understand why I thought it a bit rich for him to say in one breath that the referendum would be a loyalty vote for members of the Labour party, and in the next breath to say, "We've had enough of one-party diktat in Wales."

The right hon. Member for Swansea, West (Mr. Williams) asked whether it would be a loyalty test for Labour Members, or whether they would be allowed to speak out against the damaging and far-reaching proposals. There has not yet been a clear answer from the Government Front Bench to that question. I hope that we will get a clear answer from the Secretary of State in a few moments.

Conservatives agree that there should be referendums on the proposals in Scotland and Wales, but we do not share the extraordinary position of the Liberal party: that there should be a referendum in Wales, but not in Scotland. As the Secretary of State for Scotland said yesterday, the Liberals' reasoned amendment is something of a collectors' item, in that it implies that referendums are not necessary when the result can be predicted by members of the Liberal party and other people.

It would save a great deal of time in the democratic process in this country if we did not have to bother to have a vote whenever we thought that we could predict the outcome with a fair degree of certainty. We cannot proceed on that basis, and the Liberals may regret thinking that they can predict the outcome.

Mr. Salmond: Last Wednesday, the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) called for a 50 per cent. rule. Last Friday, the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague) called for a threshold in the referendums. Last night, the shadow Home Secretary, the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard), told us to wait and see the amendments on Report. What is the policy tonight, and will that same policy apply to any European referendum?

Mr. Hague: The policy is as explained by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard). We think that there should be a debate in the House about thresholds. We shall provide an opportunity for such a debate, and no doubt the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Mr. Salmond) will wish to participate.

The central contention of the Opposition tonight is that referendums should be held, but that they should be held when the electorate are in the best possible position to judge. They should be held when people can view all the pros and cons. They should be held when the arguments in favour and against have indeed been rigorously tested, as the hon. Member for Swansea, East would like. Referendums should be held when people know exactly what they are getting. They should be held after legislation has been debated—and debated by all Members of Parliament, on the Floor of the House of Commons.

Referendums are justifiable. They are a legitimate part of democratic decisions; but for them to be fair and compatible with the parliamentary process, we need the electors to be as well informed as possible, to know exactly what they are voting for, and for a referendum to be treated as an addition to the parliamentary process, not as a substitute for it. I should have thought that those principles would command wide agreement across the House—that the electors should be as well informed as possible, that they should know exactly what they are voting for, and that the referendum should be treated as an addition to the parliamentary process.

[Mr. Hague]

How does the Bill measure up against those principles? Is the Bill saying that referendums should be held when the electors are as well informed as possible? Would the electors be best informed before or after the publication of the legislation? Would they be best informed before or after debate has taken place in this House? Would they be best informed before or after the Government had to demonstrate that they had a workable scheme? As the hon. Member for Linlithgow said yesterday,

"the devil is . . . in the details."—[Official Report, 21 May 1997; Vol. 294, c. 806.]

The Government are not able to answer questions about the detail. They are not able to say what the role of the civil service would be, and for whom it would work. They are not able to say to whom the Secretaries of State for Scotland and for Wales would be accountable. They are not able to say what is the chain of accountability for the expenditure of public money, and where the Public Accounts Committee stands. They are not able to say what the future arrangements for the block grant would be.

The Government are not able to say what the consequences of establishing a Welsh Assembly would be for our constitutional settlement, or what the costs of establishing a Welsh Assembly would be—except, that is, for the preliminary costs, which run into millions of pounds and which the Secretary of State for Scotland has described as small change.

The Government are not able to say what the costs would be of running a Welsh Assembly; what the remuneration of members of the Assembly would be; what the resources at the disposal of members of the Assembly would be; what the number of staff required to run the Assembly would be; by what mechanism it would be funded; what the effect would be on the Welsh block grant; what the effect should be on the representation of Wales in the House of Commons; how the Welsh Assembly would relate to the European Union; how it would relate to the European Committee of the Regions; whether it would have the power to call for persons and papers; how it would relate to local government in Wales; how it would relate to non-departmental public bodies; what its consequences would be for the Welsh Grand Committee; what its consequences would be for the Secretary of State for Wales; what its consequences would be for attracting inward investment; or what its consequences would be for the Welsh economy. The Government are not able to say how the electoral arrangements for the Welsh Assembly would be changed—whether the Assembly would be able to change them itself, or whether this House would change them.

How can referendums be properly conducted without the Government being able to answer these questions? The Secretary of State for Scotland said yesterday that the referendum should be held on some general principle and the voters would be able to give their verdict before Parliament plunges into the complexity. What a reassuring message—to say to the voters that they should come to a view and then we will plunge into the complexity, in which anything can be changed and in which the Government cannot be certain that they would not want to change their plans.

Mr. Morgan: When, in a previous intervention, the right hon. Gentleman was asked whether he was in favour

of a particular threshold, he nailed his colours firmly to the fence. After all the questions he has asked, will he answer the question whether he, in his present set of two portfolios with no hon. Members behind him and as a prospective leader of the Conservative party, is saying that he is against the principle of democratic devolution for Wales and Scotland?

Mr. Hague: Of course we are against devolution for Wales and Scotland—that is what we fought the general election on, that is what we will say in the referendums—[Interruption.] The Government do not have a mandate for devolution; they have a mandate to hold referendums on devolution, and the hon. Gentleman must remember that.

The hon. Member must also remember that he sits on the Government Benches now; we on the Opposition Benches ask the questions, and we need the answers from the Government. The Government do not even know the answers to some of the questions I have asked, let alone whether they have found the right answers, whether the House would leave them unaltered, or whether they themselves would change their minds. These are the difficulties into which the Government are going to plunge the nation.

What plans do the Government have for the conduct of the referendums? The right hon. Member for Swansea, West (Mr. Williams) asked about that matter. What plans are there for equal broadcasting time? Even if the Government do have such plans—and they have given precious few signs that they have—on what basis can a referendum be held when the Government and Parliament have yet to take a view on so many of these subjects? What hope have we of receiving answers to some of these questions? The Labour party has had years to think about the answers—what hope have we that they will materialise in the next few weeks?

The Government do not have answers to many of these questions. They pretend that the questions are trivia and tell us not to worry, because the detail will all be dealt with afterwards—but it is when one goes into the detail that one realises what unworkable nonsense it is. That is what happened in 1979.

If the Government are agreed that the voters should be as well informed as possible, why is the referendum not to be delayed until after the subject has been debated by Parliament? What are the Government afraid of? Why do they not want to hear the arguments, and why do they not want the country to hear the arguments, about how precisely the scheme would work?

The Minister for Home Affairs and Devolution, winding up the debate last night, said that he wanted the maximum debate in Scotland, but it will not be the maximum debate. Maximum debate would take place once the Bill had been properly considered in the House of Commons.

Can the Government not see the danger in proceeding with referendums without being able to answer not only the detailed questions, but the fundamental questions, about their plans? Sooner or later, they would be forced to confront the inevitable consequences of their policy, to try to resolve the unsustainable position whereby Scottish Members of Parliament would be able to vote on English matters, but neither Scottish nor English Members of

Parliament would be able to vote on Scottish matters. Sooner or later, the Government would have to confront those questions.

Several months ago, before he changed his policy, the Secretary of State for Wales said that the trouble with a pre-legislation referendum is that there are so many questions that one cannot answer. He never made a more prescient or perceptive remark—perhaps he has never made any other prescient or perceptive remark—and the trouble with his current proposal for a pre-legislation referendum is that there are so many questions that he cannot answer.

One of the other criteria that I set out is that a referendum should be an addition to the parliamentary process, not a substitute for it. With their plan, the Government are trying to have the best of both worlds from their point of view: a referendum in which detailed scrutiny will be impossible, because a referendum is not a vehicle for detailed scrutiny, and the information will not be available to the voters.

If, as they hope, they secure a yes vote, they will say that no one can object later to what was in the White Paper at the time of the referendum. They take the attitude of the Prime Minister, who said two weeks ago that the voters would then expect Labour to legislate and not play games in this House—a chilling phrase to those who believe in parliamentary democracy in this country.

The Government will thereby justify taking a Bill of the most fundamental constitutional importance upstairs in Committee, which would be the best of both worlds as the Government see it, but the worst of both worlds for the operation of parliamentary democracy. There would be a referendum without adequate detail or certainty and a parliamentary debate in which, the Government hope, objections would be overridden. It would be a dangerous precedent. It shows dangerous arrogance, and it will lead to bad law.

It is one thing to use a referendum to give added legitimacy and final approval to a major change fully debated by Parliament, and quite another to use it to distort the parliamentary process and to bully those who object to it. As my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe said yesterday, it is more like the continental-style use of referendums, which we in this country have often deplored. We know that the Prime Minister likes to think that he is Lady Thatcher; now he seems to think that he is Napoleon as well.

The referendum should be held when people have had the chance to see the detail, and to find out whether the detail works. Debates that precede that referendum should take place on the Floor of the House of Commons—a convention of this place since Lord Attlee was our Prime Minister.

Yesterday, Ministers said that the Bill would certainly be considered in a Committee of the whole House. Why is it that the Bill will certainly be considered in a Committee of the whole House, but the even more far-reaching and fundamental legislation that Ministers hope will follow it will not be considered in a Committee of the whole House?

We say that it is right that referendums should be held on these fundamental, far-reaching and deeply damaging proposals. We say that it is wrong that they should be held at this time and that it is wrong that they should be held in this way. The purpose of holding them at this

time and in this way is not to allow people to decide after the fullest debate. It is not to gain assent to specific proposals—otherwise, the questions involved would not be so general.

The purpose is to win approval for the Government's plans before the intractable and unanswerable deficiencies of the scheme are fully apparent, and then to quote that approval to force through Parliament, in Committees upstairs, a mass of constitutional legislation. That is an abuse of the concept of a referendum. It is the use of a referendum as an anti-parliamentary device. It is the unmistakable sign, seen throughout history, of an over-mighty and arrogant Executive.

Our amendment calls for referendums to be held after the legislation has been debated, amended and agreed, after full scrutiny on the Floor of the House. That is the right way to conduct a referendum, and that is what we shall vote for tonight.

6.42 pm

The Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Ron Davies): We are placing before the House what seems to me a wholly unexceptionable proposition: that we should ask the people to decide. Why on earth does the Secretary of State—

Mr. Jonathan Sayeed (Mid-Bedfordshire): Shadow Secretary of State.

Mr. Davies: Why does the shadow Secretary of State take great exception to that proposition?

I shall be brief; time is limited. I hope that the House will forgive me if I do not reply individually to all hon. Members who have spoken, but I shall refer specifically to the questions that have been asked. I want to mention the maiden speeches that were made, but I do not propose to encourage interventions because of shortage of time.

Yesterday, the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire (Mr. Öpik) made his maiden speech. He shows obvious commitment to his constituency, and has already made his mark there. He paid special tribute to his predecessor, Alex Carlile, who was a liked and respected Member. He was a genuine Liberal, even when the causes that he advocated were unpopular, and I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will be a suitable replacement for him.

I welcome the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Sir R. Smith). He made a confident speech and paid a fitting tribute to George Kynoch, his predecessor. He obviously is a fitting replacement for a Minister who was forthright, if not combative, in the House. He spoke of his traditional Liberal concerns. His support for devolution in Scotland and Wales is much appreciated.

I extend a special welcome to my friend, the hon. Member for Cardiff, North (Ms Morgan). She spoke strongly of the need for fair representation for women in the House and in the Assembly. She will be a fine representative of our capital city of Cardiff. She paid a generous tribute to Gwilym Jones, a former Welsh Office Minister. She will be a strong and principled Member of Parliament, who will fight hard for her constituency, for Wales and for the cause of women.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Mrs. McGuire) paid a generous tribute to her predecessor, Michael Forsyth. He was obviously a very effective politician, but her entertaining and sincere speech shows that she is a more than fitting successor.

[Mr. Davies]

The hon. Member for St. Ives (Mr. George) made the final maiden speech in the debate. He comes from a strong radical tradition, and took great pride in declaring that Cornwall is now joining Scotland and Wales as a Tory-free zone. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] He spoke warmly of David Harris, a Member who was well known and very well respected on both sides of the House. I know that all Members who knew David Harris will want to express their sympathy for the very difficult personal circumstances in which he has found himself. I congratulate the hon. Member for St. Ives, and look forward to his regular contributions to our debates.

The Bill before us is in one sense a limited measure, simply providing for referendums to be held, in Wales and Scotland, on the Government's proposals for devolution. However, it represents the first step in a major programme of constitutional reform to which the Government are committed and which was clearly set out in our manifesto. Let there be no doubt: that programme, and so the Bill, are central to our project of renewing and modernising Britain.

Several specific points were raised in the debate yesterday and today; I shall discuss those later. First, I shall say a few words about the policy that lies behind the Bill. The shadow Secretary of State for Wales, the former Secretary of State, made the startling admission that he was opposed to devolution. Well, we already have devolved government in the United Kingdom. Substantial powers are devolved to the Secretaries of State for Wales, for Scotland and for Northern Ireland. What we do not have is direct democratic control, or even effective oversight, of those devolved powers.

The purpose of devolution of power is surely to allow diversity to flourish; to allow policies to be implemented that reflect local circumstances, traditions and needs. Among the many faults of the Conservative party is its steadfast refusal to recognise the diversity of life in the United Kingdom.

The Conservative party has deluded itself that there are single, simple answers to the problems that confront us. There has been a delusion that Government in Westminster has all the answers. That belief has at times been almost an obsession. It is an obsession to impose uniformity from the centre, regardless of local circumstances or interests. In too many cases, policy has been a "one size fits all" policy. The Conservative party still has not realised how much resentment there is in Wales at the imposition of divisive and disruptive policies such as grant-maintained schools and nursery vouchers.

Mr. Oliver Heald (North-East Hertfordshire): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Davies: No; I will not give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Heald: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. My right hon. Friend the shadow Secretary of State for

Wales asked the Secretary of State 15 questions. Would it be in order for the Secretary of State to answer one of them?

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): That is not a point of order. The Secretary of State is in order. He must be in order, because I am allowing him to speak.

Mr. Davies: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. If we have less useless time wasting, I shall have more time to answer those questions.

The policies of grant-maintained schools and nursery vouchers were designed to meet ideological party needs in London, not practical educational needs in Wales. On a range of domestic policy—but especially on education, health, the environment and economic development—Conservative ideology and party interests have prevailed over Welsh interests and Welsh values. I know that my Scottish colleagues feel strongly about the subordination of Scottish interests and values to Conservative dogma.

Last night, the shadow Secretary of State for Wales admitted that the Conservative party had

"lost the faith, the confidence and the good will of the electorate."

I suppose that that is a small step in the right direction but, given the events of 1 May, it is not a startling proposition. He went on to say that his party was

"tainted with sleaze, greed, self-indulgence and division."

The former Secretary of State for Wales should know. If ever there was sleaze, greed and self-indulgence—
[*Interruption.*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. We must not have these interruptions.

Mr. Davies: If ever there was sleaze, greed and self-indulgence, it was the way in which the right hon. Gentleman created and used the quango state in Wales to suit his own party interest. I welcome his repentance, but I would urge him to move quickly, because the road to this particular Damascus is getting very crowded.

Many in his own party now embrace the case for devolution. The Tory grandees are leading the charge—Sir Wyn Roberts, Viscount St. Davids, Lord Griffiths of Fforestfach, Tristan Garel-Jones and the former leader of the Conservative party, the right hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Sir E. Heath).

Mr. Hague: In the hope that the Secretary of State will in the time available answer at least one of the questions asked, I wish to ask him whether members of the Labour party, such as the right hon. Member for Swansea, West (Mr. Williams), will be free to campaign against devolution in the referendum if they wish to do so.

Mr. Davies: My right hon. Friend does not need the assistance of the right hon. Gentleman to ask questions. He is capable of putting his own questions, and I am capable of answering them—but I will do so in my own time.

The list goes on—Glyn Davies, the defeated candidate in Montgomery; David Evans, the defeated candidate in Newport, East; Gareth Jenkins, a former candidate in Newport, East. They recognise that democracies must be flexible, dynamic and evolutionary.

We are not going to find simple uniform answers to the many challenges we face, and the Opposition will be foolish if they do not learn the lessons of 18 years of failure in government. Increasingly, government needs to establish a framework which will encourage and facilitate local initiative to empower local people to work out the solutions that suit them best. The Welsh Assembly and the Scottish Parliament will enable the people of those countries to make their own decisions on their own priorities and on the matters that directly affect them in their own day-to-day lives.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr. Davies: No. The hon. Gentleman has not been here for the debate, and I want to reply to some of the questions that have been asked.

The hon. Member for Caernarfon (Mr. Wigley) asked whether the long title of the Bill would allow for amendment. No decision has been taken on that, but I can assure him that there will be full opportunity to debate the White Paper when it is published. If the hon. Gentleman wishes to make representations on that White Paper, we will listen to them carefully.

My hon. Friend the Member for Swansea, East (Mr. Anderson) asked certain questions. It is right that people are concerned about jobs, education and the health service, and our proposals for a better democracy will help us to bring better government to deliver better public services. He asked about the pre-legislative referendum, and expressed his own reservations. But the principles on which we will invite the people of Wales to vote will be made clear in the White Paper.

My hon. Friend the Member for Swansea, East asked about the David and Goliath scenario, whereby advantages will be given to those campaigning on either side of the argument. Let me make it clear that the Government will set out our proposals, and we will inform the public. It will then be for the political parties to decide how to campaign, and we are not proposing to provide any state aid to any party to campaign either for or against our proposals.

I wish to refer to the timing of the referendum. In Scotland, some 90 per cent. of daily newspapers are generated within Scotland. In Wales, the figure is less than 10 per cent. In Scotland, more than 90 per cent. of public broadcasting is generated in Scotland. In Wales, the figure is less than 60 per cent. Our proposals for Scotland differ from those for Wales, and it seems to me wholly unexceptional for us to argue that there should be separate debates to allow the separate forms of devolution to be debated separately in Scotland and Wales, or that the people of Wales should be invited to vote at the appropriate time on the proposals we have for Wales.

Freedom of speech is a matter that is exciting the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks—although what it has to do with him, I do not know. No one would attempt to deny my right hon. Friend the Member for Swansea, West—who has been a Member of this House for a long time—or any other hon. Member freedom of speech. The Government have a policy and the Labour party has a policy, and, obviously, we expect people to support that policy. If my right hon. Friend has difficulties with that, he will have to discuss them with my right hon. Friend the Chief Whip, and reflect and discuss with his colleagues.

The Labour party wishes to create an inclusive and tolerant Assembly. We will campaign as a party vigorously and wholeheartedly, and my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister will lead that campaign. I and my Front-Bench colleagues will campaign as vigorously as we can with all the resources available to us. I hope that my right hon. Friend the Member for Swansea, West will reflect on the wisdom of setting out on a course of action that would bring him into conflict with his party and the Government.

While the case for change is essentially a democratic one, our proposals are not only about democracy. By allowing people to have a greater say in fashioning their own lives, asserting their own values and determining their own priorities, we will be able to achieve greater economic prosperity and, by improving our public services, improve our quality of life.

Let me turn briefly to some of the other points made in the debate. First, it was suggested that we should not hold these referendums at all. I reject that. We are asking the people of Wales and the people of Scotland whether we should proceed with the process of democratisation which we clearly signalled in our manifesto, on which 34 out of 40 Members of Parliament were elected in Wales and 56 out of 72 in Scotland. Forty out of 40 Members representing Wales in this House were elected on the basis that the status quo is not an option.

I welcome the Liberal Democrats' support for our constitutional reform policies set out in the report of the joint committee between our two parties. I know that Plaid Cymru would prefer a different option—what it has come to call a "preferendum", with a number of options put before the people. The hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Mr. Jones) made a strong case for his party this evening, but the Government do not agree.

The use of referendums is relatively novel, and is part of the new, more inclusive politics which began on 1 May. But there is no precedent in the UK, and little logic, for having complex multiple-choice options. The most likely outcome of such a procedure in Wales would be no overall majority view—and no endorsement, therefore, of the Government's policy.

That is why the Government propose to put a clear choice before the people. The people should, and will, be given that clear choice. We seek endorsement of our new vision of an inclusive democracy, and we shall spell out the full details of our proposals in our White Paper.

The question of thresholds was raised in the debate and it was suggested that the threshold should be 40 or 50 per cent., as the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) has suggested. We know what that means—the creation of artificial rules, which count non-voters, absent voters or even dead voters as all voting against the proposals. Let me be clear: we shall conduct the referendums on the basis of normal democratic principles, without the construction of fancy franchises, and we shall seek majority support among those who cast their votes.

The shadow Secretary of State for Wales represents now, and represented when he was Secretary of State, all that was wrong with Conservative government. He was unaccountable to the people. Time after time, he appointed failed Tories to run the quango state in Wales. Month after month, he twisted and conspired to pack Welsh questions with his Tory cronies. His priorities

[Mr. Davies]

reflected his party needs, not the values and aspirations of Wales. He gave us unaccountable government, and the unaccountable Government gave us bad government.

Our proposals offer a better way: the prospect of open, democratic and accountable government. I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put, That the amendment be made:—

The House divided: Ayes 155, Noes 406.

Division No. 5]

[6.59 pm

AYES

Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, James
Atkinson, David (*Bour'mth E*)
Atkinson, Peter (*Hexham*)
Baldry, Tony
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter (*Worthing W*)
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian (*S Dorset*)
Burns, Simon
Butterfill, John
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney
(*Chipping Barnet*)
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Rt Hon Alan (*Kensington*)
Clark, Dr Michael (*Rayleigh*)
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth
(*Rushcliffe*)
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Colvin, Michael
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davis, Rt Hon David (*Haltemprice*)
Davies, Quentin
(*Grantham & Stamford*)
Day, Stephen
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fallon, Michael
Flight, Howard
Forth, Eric
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Goodlad, Rt Hon Alastair
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heath, Rt Hon Sir Edward
(*Old Bexley & Sidcup*)
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Heseltine, Rt Hon Michael
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald (*Aldershot*)
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert (*Wantage*)
Jenkin, Bernard (*N Essex*)
Johnson Smith,
Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom (*Bridgwater*)
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian (*New Forest E*)
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter (*Fareham*)
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
Mackay, Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Major, Rt Hon John
Mairns, Humfrey
Maples, John
Mates, Michael
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Dr Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Merchant, Piers
Moss, Malcolm
Norman, Archie
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Prior, David

Redwood, Rt Hon John
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence (*Tewk'b'ry*)
Roe, Mrs Marion (*Broxbourne*)
Ruffley, David
St Aubyn, Nick
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shepherd, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Shepherd, Richard (*Aldridge*)
Simpson, Keith (*Mid-Norfolk*)
Smyth, Rev Martin (*Belfast S*)
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian (*Esher & Walton*)
Taylor, John M (*Solihull*)
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Temple-Morris, Peter
Townend, John
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Waterson, Nigel
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willets, David
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Nicholas (*Macclesfield*)
Woodward, Shaun
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Richard Ottaway and
Mr. Peter Ainsworth.

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Adams, Mrs Irene (*Paisley N*)
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert (*Cov'try NE*)
Allan, Richard (*Sheff'd Hallam*)
Allen, Graham (*Nottingham N*)
Anderson, Donald (*Swansea E*)
Armstrong, Ms Hilary
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Ms Charlotte
Austin, John
Ballard, Mrs Jackie
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne (*Aber'd'n S*)
Bell, Stuart (*Middlesbrough*)
Benn, Rt Hon Tony
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Mrs Liz
Bleas, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Robert
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Boateng, Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Peter (*The Wrekin*)
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Gordon
(*Dunfermline E*)
Brown, Rt Hon Nick
(*Newcastle E & Wallsend*)
Brown, Russell (*Dumfries*)
Bruce, Malcolm (*Gordon*)
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Burstow, Paul
Butler, Christine
Byers, Stephen
Caborn, Richard
Campbell, Alan (*Tynemouth*)
Campbell, Mrs Anne (*C'bridge*)
Campbell, Menzies (*NE Fife*)
Campbell, Ronnie (*Blyth V*)
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Chapman, Ben (*Wirral S*)
Chaytor, David
Chidgey, David
Chisholm, Malcolm
Church, Ms Judith
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Dr Lynda
(*Edinburgh Pentlands*)
Clarke, Charles (*Norwich S*)
Clarke, Eric (*Midlothian*)
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom (*Coatbridge*)
Clarke, Tony (*Northampton S*)
Clland, David
Clwyd, Mrs Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
(*Hammersmith & Fulham*)
Colman, Anthony (*Putney*)
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank (*Stockton N*)
Cook, Rt Hon Robin (*Livingston*)
Cooper, Ms Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Ms Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann (*Keighley*)
Cryer, John (*Hornchurch*)
Cummings, John
Cunliffe, Lawrence
Cunningham, Jim (*Cov'try S*)
Cunningham, Ms Roseanna
(*Perth*)
Dafis, Cynog
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair

Darvill, Keith
 Davey, Edward (*Kingston*)
 Davey, Valerie (*Bristol W*)
 Davies, Rt Hon Denzil (*Llanelli*)
 Davies, Geraint (*Croydon C*)
 Davies, Rt Hon Ron (*Caeaphilly*)
 Davis, Terry (*Bham Hodge H*)
 Dawson, Hilton
 Dean, Ms Janet
 Denham, John
 Dewar, Rt Hon Donald
 Dismore, Andrew
 Dobbin, Jim
 Donohoe, Brian H
 Dowd, Jim
 Drew, David
 Drown, Ms Julia
 Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
 Eagle, Angela (*Wallasey*)
 Eagle, Ms Maria (*L'pool Garston*)
 Edwards, Huw
 Efford, Clive
 Elman, Ms Louise
 Ennis, Jeff
 Etherington, Bill
 Ewing, Mrs Margaret
 Fatchett, Derek
 Fearn, Ronnie
 Field, Rt Hon Frank
 Fisher, Mark
 Fitzpatrick, Jim
 Fitzsimons, Ms Lorna
 Flint, Ms Caroline
 Flynn, Paul
 Follett, Ms Barbara
 Foster, Don (*Bath*)
 Foster, Michael Jabez (*Hastings*)
 Foster, Michael John (*Worcester*)
 Fyfe, Maria
 Galbraith, Sam
 Galloway, George
 Gapes, Mike
 Gardiner, Barry
 George, Andrew (*St Ives*)
 George, Bruce (*Walsall S*)
 Gerrard, Neil
 Gibson, Dr Ian
 Gilroy, Mrs Linda
 Godman, Dr Norman A
 Godsiff, Roger
 Goggins, Paul
 Gordon, Mrs Eileen
 Gorrie, Donald
 Graham, Thomas
 Griffiths, Ms Jane (*Reading E*)
 Griffiths, Nigel (*Edinburgh S*)
 Griffiths, Win (*Bridgend*)
 Grocott, Bruce
 Grogan, John
 Gunnell, John
 Hain, Peter
 Hall, Mike (*Weaver Vale*)
 Hall, Patrick (*Bedford*)
 Hamilton, Fabian (*Leeds NE*)
 Hanson, David
 Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
 Harvey, Nick
 Heal, Mrs Sylvia
 Healey, John
 Heath, David (*Somerton*)
 Henderson, Doug (*Newcastle N*)
 Henderson, Ivan (*Harwich*)
 Hepburn, Stephen
 Heppell, John
 Hesford, Stephen
 Hewitt, Ms Patricia

Hill, Keith
 Hinchliffe, David
 Hodge, Ms Margaret
 Hoey, Kate
 Home Robertson, John
 Hoon, Geoffrey
 Hope, Philip
 Hopkins, Kelvin
 Howarth, Alan (*Newport E*)
 Howells, Dr Kim
 Hoyle, Lindsay
 Hughes, Ms Beverley
 (*Stretford & Urmston*)
 Hughes, Kevin (*Doncaster N*)
 Humble, Mrs Joan
 Hurst, Alan
 Hutton, John
 Iddon, Brian
 Illsley, Eric
 Ingram, Adam
 Jackson, Ms Glenda (*Hampstead*)
 Jackson, Mrs Helen (*Hillsborough*)
 Jamieson, David
 Jenkins, Brian (*Tamworth*)
 Johnson, Ms Melanie
 (*Welwyn Hatfield*)
 Jones, Barry (*Alyn & Deeside*)
 Jones, Ms Fiona (*Newark*)
 Jones, Helen (*Warrington N*)
 Jones, Ieuan Wyn (*Ynys Môn*)
 Jones, Ms Jenny
 (*Wolverhampton SW*)
 Jones, Dr Lynne (*Selly Oak*)
 Jones, Martyn (*Chwyd S*)
 Jones, Nigel (*Cheltenham*)
 Jowell, Ms Tessa
 Keeble, Ms Sally
 Keen, Alan (*Feltham*)
 Kelly, Ms Ruth
 Kemp, Fraser
 Kennedy, Charles
 (*Ross Skye & Inverness W*)
 Kennedy, Jane (*Wavertree*)
 Khabra, Piana S
 Kidney, David
 King, Andy (*Rugby*)
 Kingham, Tessa
 Kumar, Dr Ashok
 Ladyman, Dr Stephen
 Lawrence, Ms Jackie
 Laxton, Bob
 Lepper, David
 Leslie, Christopher
 Levitt, Tom
 Lewis, Ivan (*Bury S*)
 Lewis, Terry (*Worsley*)
 Liddell, Mrs Helen
 Linton, Martin
 Livey, Richard
 Llwyd, Elyn
 Lock, David
 Love, Andy
 McAllion, John
 McAvoy, Thomas
 McCabe, Stephen
 McCafferty, Ms Chris
 McCartney, Ian (*Makerfield*)
 McDonagh, Ms Siobhain
 Macdonald, Calum
 McDonnell, John
 McFall, John
 McGuire, Mrs Anne
 McIsaac, Ms Shona
 McKenna, Ms Rosemary
 Mackinlay, Andrew
 McLeish, Henry

McMaster, Gordon
 McNamara, Kevin
 McNulty, Tony
 MacShane, Denis
 Mactaggart, Fiona
 McWalter, Tony
 McWilliam, John
 Mahon, Mrs Alice
 Mallaber, Ms Judy
 Mandelson, Peter
 Marek, Dr John
 Marsden, Gordon (*Blackpool S*)
 Marsden, Paul (*Shrewsbury*)
 Marshall, David (*Shettleston*)
 Marshall, Jim (*Leicester S*)
 Marshall-Andrews, Robert
 Martlew, Eric
 Maxton, John
 Memon, Ms Gillian
 Michael, Alun
 Milburn, Alan
 Miller, Andrew
 Mitchell, Austin
 Moffatt, Laura
 Moonie, Dr Lewis
 Moore, Michael
 Moran, Ms Margaret
 Morgan, Alasdair (*Galloway*)
 Morgan, Ms Julie (*Cardiff N*)
 Morgan, Rhodri (*Cardiff W*)
 Morris, Ms Estelle (*Bham Yardley*)
 Morris, Rt Hon John (*Aberavon*)
 Mountford, Ms Kali
 Mudie, George
 Mullin, Chris
 Murphy, Dennis (*Wansbeck*)
 Murphy, Jim (*Eastwood*)
 Murphy, Paul (*Torfaen*)
 Naysmith, Dr Doug
 Norris, Dan
 O'Brien, Mike (*N Warks*)
 O'Hara, Edward
 Olier, Bill
 O'Neill, Martin
 Opik, Lembit
 Organ, Mrs Diana
 Osborne, Mrs Sandra
 Palmer, Dr Nick
 Pearson, Ian
 Pendry, Tom
 Pickthall, Colin
 Pike, Peter L
 Plaskitt, James
 Pond, Chris
 Pope, Greg
 Pound, Stephen
 Powell, Sir Raymond
 Prentice, Gordon (*Pendle*)
 Prescott, Rt Hon John
 Primarolo, Dawn
 Prosser, Gwyn
 Purchase, Ken
 Quinn, Ms Joyce
 Quinn, Lawrie
 Radice, Giles
 Rammell, Bill
 Rapson, Syd
 Raynsford, Nick
 Reed, Andrew (*Loughborough*)
 Reid, Dr John (*Hamilton N*)
 Robertson, Rt Hon George
 (*Hamilton S*)
 Robinson, Geoffrey (*Cov'try NW*)
 Roche, Mrs Barbara
 Rooker, Jeff
 Rooney, Terry

Ross, Ernie (*Dundee W*)
 Rowlands, Ted
 Roy, Frank
 Ruane, Chris
 Ruddock, Ms Joan
 Russell, Ms Christine (*Chester*)
 Ryan, Ms Joan
 Salmond, Alex
 Salter, Martin
 Savidge, Malcolm
 Sawford, Phil
 Sedgemore, Brian
 Shaw, Jonathan
 Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
 Shipley, Ms Debra
 Short, Rt Hon Clare
 Singh, Marsha
 Skinner, Dennis
 Smith, Rt Hon Andrew (*Oxford E*)
 Smith, Ms Angela (*Basildon*)
 Smith, Rt Hon Chris (*Islington S*)
 Smith, Ms Jacqui (*Redditch*)
 Smith, John (*Glamorgan*)
 Smith, Llew (*Blaenau Gwent*)
 Smith, Sir Robert (*W Ab'dons*)
 Snape, Peter
 Soley, Clive
 Southworth, Ms Helen
 Spellar, John
 Squire, Ms Rachel
 Starkey, Dr Phyllis
 Steinberg, Gerry
 Stevenson, George
 Stewart, David (*Inverness E*)
 Stewart, Ian (*Eccles*)
 Stinchcombe, Paul
 Stote, Dr Howard
 Stott, Roger
 Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
 Stringer, Graham
 Stuart, Mrs Gisela (*Edgbaston*)
 Stunell, Andrew
 Sutcliffe, Gerry
 Swinney, John
 Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann
 (*Dewsbury*)
 Taylor, Ms Dari (*Stockton S*)
 Taylor, David (*NW Leics*)
 Taylor, Matthew
 (*Truro & St Austell*)
 Thomas, Gareth (*Chwyd W*)
 Thomas, Gareth R (*Harrow W*)
 Timms, Stephen
 Tipping, Paddy
 Todd, Mark
 Toughig, Don
 Trickett, Jon
 Truswell, Paul
 Turner, Dennis (*Wolverhampton SE*)
 Turner, Desmond (*Kempton*)
 Turner, Dr George (*NW Norfolk*)
 Twigg, Derek (*Halton*)
 Twigg, Stephen (*Enfield*)
 Tyler, Paul
 Vaz, Keith
 Vis, Dr Rudi
 Walley, Ms Joan
 Ward, Ms Claire
 Wareing, Robert N
 Watts, David
 Welsh, Andrew
 White, Brian
 Whitehead, Alan
 Wicks, Malcolm

Wigley, Dafydd
 Williams, Rt Hon Alan
 (Swansea W)
 Williams, Dr Alan W
 (E Carmarthen)
 Williams, Mrs Betty (Conwy)
 Willis, Phil
 Wills, Michael
 Wilson, Brian
 Winnick, David
 Winterton, Ms Rosie (Doncaster C)

Wood, Mike
 Woolas, Phil
 Worthington, Tony
 Wray, James
 Wright, Dr Tony (Cannock)
 Wright, Tony (Gt Yarmouth)
 Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
 Ms Bridget Prentice and
 Janet Anderson.

Question accordingly negated.

Main Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 62 (Amendment on Second or Third Reading), and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

Motion made, Question put, pursuant to Standing Order No. 63 (Committal of Bills), That the Bill be committed to a Committee of the whole House—[Mr. Ron Davies].

Question agreed to.

Committee upon Monday 2 June.

REFERENDUMS (SCOTLAND AND WALES) BILL [MONEY]

Queen's recommendation having been signified—

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 52(1)(a),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Referendums (Scotland and Wales) Bill, it is expedient to authorise—

(1) the charging on and payment out of the Consolidated Fund of any expenditure which is to be charged on and paid out of that Fund by virtue of any enactment applied by an Order in Council under the Act; and

(2) the payment out of money provided by Parliament of any expenditure of the Secretary of State—

(a) in connection with a referendum held by virtue of the Act, or

(b) in preparation for the establishment of a Scottish Parliament or a Welsh Assembly.—[Mr. Clelland.]

Question agreed to.

Procedure (Modernisation)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—[Mr. Clelland.]

7.19 pm

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Ann Taylor): Mr. Deputy Speaker, thank you for calling me to open this debate during which we shall discuss some of the ideas that have been advanced for modernising the procedures of the House of Commons. I am pleased that the Government have been able to provide time for the debate during only the second full week of this Parliament. *[Interruption.]*

Madam Speaker: Order. Hon. Members must leave the Chamber quickly and quietly. There is a debate going on and the Leader of the House is at the Dispatch Box.

Mrs. Taylor: I hope that, by holding this debate so early in the Parliament, we have proved our serious intent in terms of facilitating improvements in the workings of Parliament.

After only two or three weeks in this place, many new Members are bewildered by some of the practices of the House and are keen to see some changes. I am glad to see so many hon. Members present for this debate, not least because there has been little interest when we have debated the workings of the House previously.

We have encountered some practical problems since Parliament resumed—including hon. Members' complaints about the difficulty of fitting so many of them into one Division Lobby. I know that hon. Members are considering some imaginative solutions to that problem.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): I have two specific ideas that my right hon. Friend and others might consider. First, the construction of a third desk in the Lobbies would allow the traffic to flow more quickly. Secondly, we could examine the two-minute break between the announcement of the Division and the tellers going to the Doors. Those two proposals could conceivably save three or four minutes.

Mrs. Taylor: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his constructive suggestion. I hope that there will be many more such suggestions not just this evening, but during the sittings of the proposed Select Committee on modernisation. I note that my hon. Friend did not suggest introducing electronic voting or anything like that; that may be because he has been in this place long enough to know the value of Divisions, when hon. Members have a chance to meet their colleagues and—whether they are the newest or the most experienced Back Benchers—to lobby Ministers. I hope that many ideas will be forthcoming in that area.

This evening I shall discuss some of the issues that I believe the new Committee should address. As shadow Leader of the House, I made it clear that, although I think that Parliament can deal excellently with some issues and situations, it does not organise itself to do the best possible job in other areas.

The roles of Back Benchers and new Members of Parliament have changed over the years. When I first came to the House in the mid-1970s—I must admit that

it is a long time ago—Back Benchers could adopt two distinct roles. The first was to climb the ministerial ladder, starting as a parliamentary private secretary; the second, very legitimate and respected, role was to become a senior Back Bencher. That group dominated many debates and Question Times. It may be that, with many Back Benchers on one side of the House, more hon. Members will be interested in developing the role of the Back Bencher. I think that it is in the interests of the House to recreate and re-evaluate that role. We should have regard to that point when considering possible changes.

The second big change that has occurred since the 1970s is a consequence of one party being in government for 18 years. I do not seek to make a partisan point, because it might have happened to any party that stayed in power for a long time. After a time, the Conservative Government believed that they could get away with anything, do anything and push any legislation through the House; while too many Opposition Members believed that they could not achieve anything.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): If that is the case, would it not be a good idea to introduce a freedom of information Act immediately? That would ensure that that situation does not arise again.

Mrs. Taylor: I ask my hon. Friend to be patient, as I shall return to that point later. As a very experienced senior Back Bencher, she will agree that there is a danger of Governments and Oppositions adopting rigid roles. For a time in the 1980s, the Labour party suffered from Oppositionitis and the Government suffered from—

Mr. Skinner: Arrogance.

Mrs. Taylor:—Governmentitis—or arrogance, as my hon. Friend neatly puts it. It may be time to reassess the role of both sides. When the Prime Minister told a meeting of the parliamentary Labour party that we are the servants now, he was reinforcing the need for Governments to re-examine their role and not act with the arrogance that, as my hon. Friend pointed out, was the hallmark of the recent past.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): While the right hon. Lady is on the theme of arrogance—and lest anyone misunderstand her comments—will she pursue that line in the context of her colleagues' recent actions when they displayed what many inside and outside the House regard as arrogance by making very important policy statements outside Parliament without consulting this place? That does not seem to be a very good background against which to develop the hon. Lady's argument.

Mrs. Taylor: I was hoping to have a constructive debate this evening. As a Minister in the previous Government—recalling his time as Education Minister, I believe that he was guilty occasionally—the hon. Gentleman should be cautious about his remarks. I think that all Ministers should treat the House with the respect that it deserves, as I said during business questions earlier today. Any change in Government policy should be reported to the House, but I do not think that statements should be made on the Floor of the House about every policy item—that certainly never happened when the hon. Gentleman's party was in government.

[Mrs. Taylor]

Whenever parliamentary change is discussed, everyone mentions the Jopling reforms and the changes that were introduced some time ago. I remind the House of two things. First, as I said at the time, Jopling dealt with only a narrow range of issues: the hours of Parliament and how they were arranged; and, to a certain and minor extent, the balance between Committee work and work on the Floor of the House.

Secondly, hon. Members should remember that, although Jopling reported relatively quickly, the House sat on the report for almost three years before implementing its recommendations. I hope that, when a new Committee is established and begins to report to the House—hopefully, there will be a succession of reports; I do not want it to deliberate for two years before offering some ideas—there will be change relatively quickly, and much agreement about moving on some of its recommendations.

Mrs. Helen Jackson (Sheffield, Hillsborough): I welcome my right hon. Friend's remarks about moving quickly. As she will know, many of the new Labour Back Benchers are women. They and other new Members of Parliament must have an opportunity to contribute to parliamentary Committees while they are relatively new. We should listen to their experiences and take advantage now of their expertise and skills.

Mrs. Taylor: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. I share her concern that we should move quickly in setting up departmental Select Committees so that hon. Members have a chance to work in the way that they wish.

Sir Peter Emery (East Devon): For accuracy, and only for that, it should be made clear that implementation of the report of the Jopling Committee, on which the right hon. Lady and I served, was held up for many moons by an hon. Member with a small majority who used to sit on the Opposition Front Bench as the deputy Chief Whip. He was against anything all the while on the Jopling report. It must be made clear that that was the delaying factor.

Mrs. Taylor: I think that there were several hon. Members on both sides of the House who were not happy with the proposed changes. In the end, however, those changes were implemented. I like to think that I played some small part in that process.

The fact that we on the Government Benches want to encourage the House to change should come as no surprise to anyone. It is made clear in the Labour party's manifesto that we, the Labour party, believe that the House is in need of modernisation and that we will ask the House to establish a Select Committee to review its procedures. I have said over a long time that I think that the House needs change.

The desire to improve the workings of Parliament is shared by hon. Members on both sides of the House. Yes, there have been some—on both sides of the Chamber—who have resisted change, but the majority, certainly on the Labour Benches, and a good many who represent the minority parties and those who represent the official Opposition, want constructive change. There is a wish to take the opportunity that is now available to us.

I wish to signal priorities and the way in which the Committee might consider the issues that I think need attention. There are four themes to the changes that could perhaps be brought about. First, and, I think, the most important, is the production of better legislation. In that, we all have a responsibility. Ministers have a responsibility, and so does Parliament generally. After all, we are the legislature. I hope that the new Committee will give that area particular priority.

Mr. Christopher Gill (Ludlow): Would it not be better if much more legislation were routed through the Select Committees, so that Select Committees could take evidence from those interested in particular subjects? Should we not try to ensure that the result is legislation that is much better than that which we have seen in the past?

Mrs. Taylor: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his constructive suggestion. I am coming precisely to his point. We all know that, far too often, legislation has to be amended because of practical difficulties and mistakes that could have been spotted and dealt with at the time of consideration. That is not, I think, the result of poor draftsmanship. Difficulties and mistakes often occur because of the political imperatives that stem from Governmentitis. It seems that Governments feel that they should never accept an amendment moved by an Opposition Member. All too often, there has been no scope for constructive criticism.

Mr. Forth: The House should not imagine that a previous Government were necessarily completely at fault for a failure properly to scrutinise legislation in Committee. Will the right hon. Lady accept that what happened in Standing Committees was largely under the control of the then Opposition, and that all too often time was wasted at the beginning of a Bill's consideration in Committee, with endless filibustering on the sittings motion, for example, with the result that the end of the time available for consideration came too soon in one sense, and some parts of the Bill received no consideration at all? We should consider that as well as the behaviour of the Government.

Mrs. Taylor: The hon. Gentleman's remarks might carry some weight were it not for the fact that I have served on Standing Committees with him. I was a member of a Committee on which he was the Minister. The Government, late in the day, came up with nearly 1,000 amendments on that Bill. I do not think that we, the Government, can take lectures on the point that the hon. Gentleman has raised.

Mr. Paul Flynn (Newport, West): Has my right hon. Friend studied the Committee proceedings on the personal pensions legislation in 1986 and the Child Support Agency legislation—enactments that did no credit to the House? The problems that ensued—they were enormous because 2 million people were cheated on personal pensions, and we all know of the tragedies and injustices that resulted from the Child Support Agency—arose from the fact that the two major parties were confrontational. They did not listen to each other and there was no rational scrutiny of the enabling Bills. That is the type of scrutiny that we must introduce into a new system of pre-legislative inquiries.

Mrs. Taylor: My hon. Friend is anticipating the very points that I am about to make.

It is rather obvious that a Government have the right to initiate legislation for which they have a mandate or when problems arise. Much of that legislation will be controversial and it will be promoted or forced through robustly; however, there are areas of legislation where there might be differences of approach or of priorities across the party divide, but where at the same time there is agreement on an objective, or where there is agreement that a certain problem needs to be tackled. My hon. Friend's example about pensions was extremely useful in highlighting that point.

There is scope for considering to what extent we would gain by having more Bills published in draft and, possibly, by having pre-legislative Committees to examine draft Bills or White Papers or—it is not the method that I would prefer—using departmental Select Committees. The use of such Committees is still worthy of consideration. These are the very issues that the proposed Committee might consider.

Dr. Norman A. Godman (Greenock and Inverclyde): I remind my right hon. Friend that a Special Standing Committee was set up three years ago, I think, to examine the Children (Scotland) Bill. The establishment of the Committee enabled us to cross-examine expert witnesses. It may be useful to reflect on the Standing Order—I think that it is Standing Order No. 91—that allows such a Committee to be created. That might be a useful way forward.

Mrs. Taylor: I agree. There were times during the previous Parliament when we, the then Opposition, suggested that very procedure. We were told, however, that it would not be acceptable. I think that we need to change our approach and to consider the approach that my hon. Friend has suggested in appropriate circumstances.

I am not saying that every Bill should receive consideration by pre-legislative Committees or a Special Standing Committee; that could cause unnecessary duplication and delay. We should, however, consider what is appropriate for each Bill, and Government and Parliament should be more willing to use the available options more freely. There should be more discussion about that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Newport, West (Mr. Flynn) mentioned the Child Support Agency. There was agreement on both sides of the House that something should be done and that fathers had a responsibility towards their children. The Bill was subject to the usual procedures, and I understand why the then Government wanted to act quickly. At the end of the day, however, the Bill was flawed. It satisfied no one and angered many. We all received the case load that proved that.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): I speak as a Chairman of Committees. I am always disturbed that Government Back-Bench Members, whichever party is in government, say virtually nothing. They have a contribution to make and Bills should be timetabled in such a way that Government as well as Opposition Back-Bench Members can make constructive contributions to debate.

Mrs. Taylor: There has to be a role for constructive contributions, and Back Benchers—and we have many of them—will be very dissatisfied if they are not allowed to make a constructive contribution.

Had we scrutinised the Child Support Agency Bill differently, some of that scrutiny might have led to delay. In those circumstances, there are already provisions for the use of a rollover mechanism, but at the moment that is considered to be dreadful and something that should never happen. If we take a more mature approach and allow extra time for better scrutiny, we must consider whether we should move in that direction.

The Government are willing to acknowledge that more could be done by way of publishing draft Bills. In fact, it is our intention to publish during this Session a record number of draft Bills—we will move on this as quickly as possible—on a range of subjects: a food standards agency, freedom of information and tobacco advertising. Although there might be disagreement about how we should tackle the problems of smoking, especially among young people, there is cross-party agreement that something should be done. Other subjects include financial services, limited liability partnerships and the control of communicable diseases. There are areas where we could, to good effect, publish draft Bills and then consider the role of Parliament in ensuring proper scrutiny.

Mr. Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield): Does my right hon. Friend agree that, in addition to draft Bills, which can perform a useful function, the fact that the Government are looking at other consensus-building mechanisms on the big political issues of the day should be welcomed? I add my welcome—I hope that she will, too—to the comments made by my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary just a couple of days ago that he wishes to make early progress on the establishment of a commission to examine the methods that are used to elect Members to this place. That is a consensus-building mechanism that can work and needs to be welcomed.

Mr. Skinner: Steady with that one.

Mrs. Taylor: I always take advice from my hon. Friend, and if he says steady, I shall be very careful about what I say.

We have all experienced problems—some of which my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes) raised in an Adjournment debate yesterday morning—in elections. There are problems that we should look at on an all-party basis, and if we can arrive at solutions, so much the better.

Mrs. Teresa Gorman (Billerica): Does the right hon. Lady agree that there is much truth in the aphorism that he who governs least governs best, and that one problem that we in this place have is that we all rush to the judgment that we know what is better for other people and then end up making very bad legislation and very complicated lives for the people whom we seek to govern? Will she bear that in mind in her haste to introduce all these new Bills?

Mrs. Taylor: I shall certainly bear in mind what the hon. Lady said. She spoke about the complexities of Bills. Let me add a personal note. Legislation should be as understandable as possible. Anyone who can find a way to present our legislation in plain English will certainly get a great deal of credit from me.

On the amount of legislation that is necessary, I am afraid that, on a partisan note, much needs to be done to redress some of the balance of the past few years.

[Mrs. Taylor]

I was asked about the proper programming of legislation. I hope that the new Committee will examine that. We need to consider what alternatives there might be to the guillotine imposed by the Government with a majority and the voluntary understandings that have been tried in the past. Sometimes they have worked, sometimes not, but there is scope to see what other mechanisms could be available to achieve better planning of legislation.

Another area that the Committee should consider is the balance of work on the Floor of the House and upstairs in Committee. That was touched on by Jopling, but only at the margins. I feel strongly that the work of Standing Committees never gets the attention or credit that it deserves. Select Committees get some recognition, but it is rare for Standing Committees or some of the Scrutiny Committees to get any attention whatever. Perhaps if the media feel that they have extra slots available because of the changes to Prime Minister's Questions they will turn their attention to Committee work, because those of us who have been here for any time know that much valuable work goes on in Committees. Many hon. Members work in Committees, but that work goes without recognition.

I also hope that the Committee will look at the other main role of Parliament—holding Ministers to account. The changes to Prime Minister's Questions will be beneficial, but I do not want to go into them this evening, not least because there is an Adjournment debate on that subject next week. However, yesterday, more questions were asked. There were more opportunities to follow up. There were more serious questions, from both sides of the House, and, indeed, more serious answers.

There is still scope for discussion on further changes: for example, considering the role of open or closed questions, or the period of notice for the tabling of questions. The Committee may wish to look at that. On departmental questions, there are other areas that could be considered: for example, whether there should be a facility to request the Speaker to allow a longer period for supplementaries on a question on a particularly important or topical issue.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): On the delicate matter of not wanting to tell the Speaker how to do her job, should we not air the question about the acceptability of private notice questions? There is most rigorous examination of any attempt to table a private notice question, yet it affords a serious, continuous follow-up on an important topical matter.

Mrs. Taylor: I agree that we need to consider all these matters, but private notice questions have to be used for serious matters only. We have to remember that, whenever we allow time for one issue, we are taking it away from something else. The balance has to be considered extremely carefully.

I hope that all hon. Members will agree that the Committee should consider improved ways of scrutinising delegated legislation, be it statutory instruments or European legislation, or other improvements. There is scope. I know that work has been done by other Committees. I hope that it can be looked at quickly.

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde): The right hon. Lady mentioned European legislation. Her party has shown a

zeal to agree to potentially controversial matters already. The current methods of scrutiny, with European Standing Committees A and B, leave much to be desired, because they scrutinise regulations or directives very late in their legislative passage in the House and in Europe. Will the Committee seriously consider involving the House in European legislation, particularly at the draft stage, at an earlier point?

Mr. Skinner: What a difference a defeat makes.

Mrs. Taylor: The hon. Member for Fylde was part of a Government who did not change this area. I remind him that Committees in the previous Parliament came up with some recommendations, and some of us gave evidence to the effect that certain approaches should change in the future.

The Committee could look at the set-piece debates that we have: the Queen's Speech, the number of days that we spend on the Budget, the number on the armed forces and on the estimates. These may be right. We have seen some flexibility, but surely it is right for the Committee to consider whether we are making the best use of parliamentary time. I hope this will be an opportunity to take stock.

Ms Julia Drown (South Swindon): One of the things that struck me immediately as a new Member, is the number of empty Benches during many of our debates. I have continually to decide between dealing with the many pieces of correspondence from my constituents and wanting to be here on their behalf, listening to and taking part in the debate. I have been told that it is frowned upon to work quietly during the debate. I should be grateful if the Committee would look at that and clarify it for all hon. Members.

Mrs. Taylor: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for opening up the next theme that the Committee should consider, which is how hon. Members can organise their working lives, on which there has been much comment, especially from new Members.

If our constituents see us speaking in or listening to a debate in the Chamber, they believe that we are working, but if we are not in the Chamber they tend to believe that we are not working. I have already said that we should re-evaluate, or have others re-evaluate, Committee work. I feel strongly about that.

There must also be some recognition of constituency work. Many of our constituents want us to be in two places at once. We cannot be, and we should not be, defensive about that, but we should design our parliamentary timetable with those dual roles in mind. We could do more in that regard. That is particularly important for non-London Members. Constituency Fridays have been a great success and we should see whether we can improve on them in the future.

I am glad that we can have a recess next week. Many new Members are concerned about the impact of the sittings of the House on their families. The Whitsun recess is the only one that ever coincides with the schools half-term, so I am particularly glad that we have been able to preserve that next week. That is another point that we can consider when it comes to the programme.

Mr. Michael Connarty (Falkirk, East): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mrs. Taylor: I can anticipate what my hon. Friend is about to say.

Mr. Connarty: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend, particularly given her origins north of the border. The Whitsun recess does not coincide with the Scottish schools holiday, and nor does a large part of the summer recess. Most of the school summer holiday in Scotland is over before Scottish Members can return to their children.

Mrs. Taylor: The October half-term in Scotland sometimes coincides with the recess, but they never coincide in England and Wales, so we shall have to do some balancing acts there.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mrs. Taylor: No, I am sorry, but I must move on.

The fourth area that could be considered is not a priority, but it has been raised, particularly by new Members: it is the style and the symbolism that is associated with Parliament, which we have seen in the past few weeks. There is a feeling that, while it is good to reinforce our parliamentary traditions, we might be able to modify some aspects of them without any loss of ceremony or dignity.

Many practical problems arise with new Members not knowing colleagues or Members from other parties or the names of their constituencies, and ideas have been put forward on that. It would be unfortunate for the Committee to get bogged down in that matter at the expense of examining the basic role of Parliament, but it would be right at least to consider it in due course. *[Interruption.]* People will disagree, but that is why we will have a Committee to make recommendations.

Many of the changes that the Committee will consider will interact, and working on that Committee will be a serious commitment both in terms of time and responsibility. The House responded well to the Nolan recommendations. The special Select Committee operated to a tight schedule and worked extremely hard to bring about change. I hope that that will happen again with this modernisation Committee.

I am delighted to see so much interest in the House this evening. That is the best sign that we have had in many years that there is a serious intention to modernise this place, and I hope that we do not miss this window of opportunity.

7.53 pm

Mr. Alastair Goodlad (Eddisbury): Conservative Members welcome the opportunity of an early debate on parliamentary procedure. Like the President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons, the right hon. Member for Dewsbury (Mrs. Taylor), we are eager to listen to the views of colleagues.

Parliament has for centuries performed a role in debating and improving legislation, in holding the Executive to account and as the forum for debates of national importance. Conservative Members are

determined that Parliament, and particularly the House of Commons, should retain its central role in our political and national life. To do so, our procedures sometimes need reform. If it is clear that change is necessary or desirable, we shall support it. But if our institutions and procedures are working well, we shall defend them. The Conservative party is a pragmatic party, and we shall offer constructive opposition.

Those considerations have animated and will continue to guide our approach to reforming the House of Commons and our response to any recommendations which may be made by the proposed Select Committee on modernisation.

As the right hon. Lady said, some of the most significant reforms of Parliament have taken place during the past 18 years. The previous Government animated the establishment of the departmental Select Committees in 1979—perhaps the most important transfer of power from Government to Parliament this century.

Mr. Skinner: I cannot stand the excitement.

Mr. Goodlad: The hon. Gentleman persists in treating serious matters with levity, just as he treats trivial matters with his own brand of long-winded portentousness.

Mr. Skinner: Come on, Duracell.

Mr. Goodlad: The House has no escape from the hon. Gentleman, who continues to test the tolerance for which it is famous.

Mr. Skinner: I have got the right hon. Gentleman wound up.

Mr. Goodlad: I will now wind down, unless the hon. Gentleman wishes to delay the House even further.

Those Committees examine in great detail the way in which each Government Department spends its money, implements Government decisions and the policy that is followed. The reports are debated regularly on the Floor of the House. Professor Hennessy, the constitutional expert, said:

"I rate the establishment of the so-called departmentally related Commons Select Committees in 1979 as not just the most significant parliamentary development of the post-war period, but the single most important clawback in terms of the relevant influence of the legislature and the executive since the Balfour reforms of 1902."

We shall obviously consider any proposals that come forward in connection with the Select Committees with the greatest care.

The television broadcasts which were introduced more than seven years ago were intended to give people a clearer idea of how Parliament works. Whether the way in which they have been used by the broadcaster has had that effect is a matter on which opinions may vary, but we are where we are and, if we wish to move we can move.

Many of the recommendations of the Jopling Committee set up in 1991 to examine the sittings of the House are now firmly in place. We work more civilised hours and we have set aside constituency days. More time has been set aside for private Members' business and the House now spends longer debating Select Committee reports.

[Mr. Goodlad]

Last year, my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition proposed reforms which would help Parliament to scrutinise legislation still further. Most significantly, he suggested that detailed proposals for legislation be prepared not just for the next Session but in draft for the Session after that. That would allow Select Committees time to take evidence and report on Bills, and would give Parliament a more positive and forward-looking role.

Those are just a few of the reforms that were taken through the House in the previous Session to improve the work of Parliament. The Nolan committee was established in 1994 to assist in the maintenance of the highest standards in public life. It has produced two reports, and has resulted in improvements, such as bringing Ministers within the scope of the advisory committee on business appointments, an extension of the ombudsman's powers, a code of practice for the staff of quangos and more consultation between local quangos and councils. The third report, which will review local government, is due to be published this summer.

The right hon. Lady has raised a number of fresh matters, and that is extremely welcome. I hope that all hon. Members agree that we want to improve the quality of legislation, to hold the Government to account, and to make the best use of our parliamentary time. If the reforms put before the Committee and the House achieve those aims, we will support them and suggest how they might be improved.

Ministerial accountability was reviewed by the previous Government and Parliament. The review was endorsed by the Public Service Select Committee, and a resolution on ministerial accountability was drafted with the full co-operation and support of other parties and was passed by the House.

It is suggested that certain Bills should roll over into the following Session. We shall work with the Government to develop that proposal. It is also suggested that there should be more consultation on draft Bills before they pass through the House. Significant moves have already been made in that direction in the past 18 years, and we shall work with the Government on those proposals to see whether the approach can be further developed.

Progress has been made to remove out-dated Acts from the statute book. Under the Deregulation and Contracting Out Act 1994, the Government can place an order before Parliament to amend or repeal legislation that has become burdensome. We shall examine the Government's proposals to audit out-dated legislation and consider whether they would be beneficial.

Suggestions have been made that we should change the structure of the parliamentary year. We want to see what issues emerge from that—the timing of recesses, working hours and so on—before we offer any comment, but we shall give careful consideration to the details of the Government's proposals when we have seen them. We welcome the promise by the Leader of the House of a Government memorandum for the Committee once it has been established.

There are also suggestions that departmental Select Committees should have new powers to confirm public appointments, such as the heads of the next steps

agencies. We shall await further details, but it is our belief that constitutional accountability must remain with Ministers. Likewise, we await further details of the suggestion that the operation of the Opposition would be made more effective if civil servants were attached to senior figures.

We have reservations, however, on three particular points. First, the Government may seek to introduce a business committee to timetable legislation, which has traditionally been dealt with through the usual channels. The system has proved itself over the years: it has worked reasonably well. We accept that the Government have to steer their business through the House, but I am inclined to think that, if the usual channels cannot reach an agreement about the legislative programme, the final decision should be taken by the whole House. I would take some persuading that it should be taken by a small committee.

The second point relates to the Committee stage of constitutional Bills. We have reservations about the Government's intention to deal with some clauses of constitutional Bills away from the Floor of the House. I envisage problems with that approach, because what for some hon. Members may be a technical detail may for others be an important constitutional principle and not a mere technicality.

Mr. Andrew F. Bennett (Denton and Reddish): If the right hon. Gentleman is so keen for constitutional matters to be taken on the Floor of the House, what about using Tuesday and Thursday mornings to do so?

Mr. Goodlad: I certainly hope that the Committee will consider that. We have pointed out some of the difficulties of the broad-brush approach. Those who are versed in these matters, as the right hon. Lady has been for some time, know that the devil is very much in the detail.

The third point relates to the announcement from Downing street of the changes to Prime Minister's Question Time. Many hon. Members from all parties have made clear their distaste for the arbitrary way in which the change was introduced. It is clear that the manner of the announcement was inappropriate and sits uneasily with the Prime Minister's comments in his speech to the Charter 88 seminar on parliamentary reform in May 1996. He said:

"the lesson of previous parliamentary change is that it has to be carried out with care and sensitivity. . . The rights of backbenchers have to be protected."

Mr. Skinner: In the past 18 years and before that, changes were made to departmental questions and questions generally. We should put this business in context. The right hon. Gentleman may recall that the Tory Government made a dramatic change. We used to have 20 minutes for Common Market Questions at 3.10 pm after Foreign Office Questions. That allowed me and hon. Members on both sides of the House to ask questions directly about the Common Market. When the Common Market became an embarrassment for the Tory Government, they did not move Common Market Questions to another day: they got rid of it altogether without any consultation or agreement. It is a bit rich for

Tory ex-Ministers to talk about consultation, when they got rid of a potentially embarrassing 20 minutes completely.

Mr. Goodlad: The more latitude that the Government allow the hon. Member for Bolsover (Mr. Skinner) to deploy his case in questions elsewhere, the more welcome it will be to us.

I shall return to the Prime Minister's views. He said:

"the lesson of previous parliamentary change is that it has to be carried out with care and sensitivity. . . The rights of backbenchers have to be protected. They will understandably be wary of changes which appear to be advocated simply to make the job of government easier."

The decision to change Prime Minister's Questions was made without reference to the forthcoming Select Committee on modernisation. Moreover, such a proposal was rejected by the Select Committee on Procedure in 1995. I believe that the proposal should have gone to the new Select Committee on modernisation, should still do so, and probably will.

The Labour party's manifesto asserted that better scrutiny of Bills and better accountability of Ministers are desirable: nobody would quarrel with that. But it is up to hon. Members, rather than mere institutional arrangements, to hold Ministers to account and to scrutinise legislation. I am sure that the failings of the Opposition in the previous Parliament in scrutinising Bills—there certainly were failings—will not be repeated by the Opposition in the present Parliament.

We agree with the proposition that no one political party should dictate changes to parliamentary procedure, and that Parliament itself must own that process. There is clearly a danger that, when a political party has a substantial majority in the House, as at present, the interests of Parliament as a whole could be put at risk. I am sure that the right hon. Lady will restrain any tendency towards the arrogance of office that may from time to time be exhibited by her ministerial colleagues. Ultimately, it is up to the House to decide how we should conduct our affairs.

I trust that the Government will take seriously the deliberations and decisions of the Select Committee on modernisation that we are about to set up. I hope that hon. Members on both sides of the House will consider its conclusions on their merits rather than on party political lines, and I hope that the Government will make no further announcements that rightly belong with the House. I am confident that the right hon. Lady, who has great experience in these matters—as did her predecessor, Tony Newton, to whom I pay tribute as she did the other day—will be the protector of the rights, privileges and duties of the House.

8.10 pm

Mr. Robert Sheldon (Ashton-under-Lyne): My right hon. Friend the Leader of the House has given a number of pointers indicating the way in which our procedures can be changed. I want to add to them.

I think that the most important development for the current Parliament is the number of Government Back Benchers. We now have 418, a number unprecedented in modern times, and we must make some use of them. They are willing, able and extremely well qualified to add to the quality of our debates and our legislation, but some of

our procedures do not allow for that. My right hon. Friend spoke of better legislation, and mentioned the record number of draft Bills. That is an important point, because we now have a large number of people to examine those Bills.

Normally, in Standing Committees, Government Back Benchers are asked to be quiet so that the legislation can go through quickly. That may be all right when the Government have a narrow majority and do not know whether they will be able to put the legislation through, but these Back Benchers can be used to improve the quality of that legislation. There is no reason why such a large number should remain silent—and, in any event, it will not be possible to keep them silent. There are too many of them, and not enough of the jobs to which Back Benchers used to aspire in the past. We must provide jobs that will be useful and meaningful, and will benefit the legislation.

Mr. Gill: Has the right hon. Gentleman seen early-day motion 5, in which members of his party recommend that no one should serve on a Select Committee who has any declarable financial interest in the subject of the Committee's responsibility?

The right hon. Gentleman talks of employing the talents and experience of new Members, and I agree that that is desirable, but is it not slightly contradictory to say to those people—who have brought new talents and experience to the House—that they should not serve on Committees, where they will possibly have the greatest contribution to make? Does the right hon. Gentleman approve of the situation that seems to be developing? It appears that our Committees will be composed of people who have no expertise in the subjects involved, and will therefore be at the mercy of civil servants.

Mr. Sheldon: It will clearly depend on the nature of the interest involved; but, as I have not seen the early-day motion, I do not want to comment on it.

The way in which we have produced legislation recently is shameful. If hon. Members visit Somerset house, they will see that, in the last century, one book of financial legislation was produced per year, or perhaps in two or three years—until the past few years, for which there is a whole shelf of legislation for each year. Even more recently, the legislation has filled several shelves. Financial legislation has been pouring out at an immense rate, and the House has not been looking at it; but we now have people who can make some contribution.

Anyone who has been involved in a Standing Committee will know that, when it comes to draft legislation, there are always matters that Members of Parliament can raise which the drafters had not thought of. There is a different way of thinking about such matters. Given the quality of our new Members, I am sure that they will be able to make improvements, and to do work that has been waiting to be done. I look forward to the establishment of many more special Standing Committees. We have people who are able and anxious to operate them, and I agree with my right hon. Friend that we should proceed in that way.

I am all in favour of tradition, as long as it does not interfere with our work. Our traditions go back 700 years, and I consider that a plus; but, when they do interfere, we have got rid of them. If there are some traditions of which

[Mr. Sheldon]

I am not aware, or on which I have not concentrated enough, by all means let us change them, but we have benefited from the way in which the country has progressed, and we should continue to do so.

We have made a real mess of our financial year, and it is probably in that area that we can make the biggest change of all. We used to have the Budget in the spring; it would become an Act of Parliament by August, and the expenditure statement would be made in the autumn. It was felt, however, that expenditure and revenue should be brought together, so that we could say, "If you want this expenditure, you must incur this increase in taxation." It was a brilliant idea—no one can disagree with that—but, for obvious reasons, it did not happen.

The Government decide expenditure levels. It has never been possible for the House, and Back Benchers in particular, to say, "Yes, let us put a penny on income tax if we want to give something to education"—which is what the Liberals want—or, "Let us reduce income tax by so much, and reduce expenditure by so much." We could never operate a trade-off of that kind, but, without such a trade-off, the idea of bringing together revenue and expenditure was nonsense. All we did was have the Queen's Speech in November, followed two weeks later by the Budget, followed by seven months during which the Chancellor of the Exchequer did not make a speech in the House.

That is absurd. For as long as we see that we shall not be able to debate revenue and expenditure together, because Back Benchers will never have the right to increase expenditure or taxation, we can say that the autumn Budget has not been a success, and that we must adopt a more sensible arrangement—which means having the Budget statement in the spring, and debating clauses of general significance on the Floor of the House and the technical stuff in a Standing Committee. That arrangement was devised by the then Government in 1967. I remember that, under Iain Macleod, we spent a day and a half in the Standing Committee discussing the temperature of Committee Room 10. It was brilliantly done, but it demonstrated that the whole House needed to be involved.

The present system is sensible. Matters of critical, general and observable importance that involve everyone—matters such as income tax and value added tax—are debated on the Floor of the House, while the technical aspects are debated in Standing Committee. I think that more issues should be debated on the Floor of the House, but I have a particular interest in that regard.

Attendance in the Chamber is a serious matter. Dick Crossman is responsible for the present position, because he devised a system to get rid of the count. Before 1967, if there were not 40 Members in the Chamber, the House had to adjourn within four minutes. The enormous advantage of that system was that there was always a body of Members in the Chamber. I know that everyone has much more constituency correspondence to deal with now, and we are unlikely to return to the old arrangement; but that is the difference between the House as it was then, and the House as it is now.

For debates on important matters, it is important to have hon. Members cheering others on or being prepared to show that something is wrong. However, we have to

deal with constituency matters, and we now have a free post, free telephones, secretaries and television in offices. More people than ever are probably watching our debates on television, but they are not participating. It is voices in the present that electrify the House and such electrification is what makes it the place that it is. That happens only at Prime Minister's Question Time and on one or two other special occasions. It used to be much more common, and I hope that we can find some way to improve matters.

Mr. John Maxton (Glasgow, Cathcart): It is pointless sitting here when there is so much constituency work and Select Committee and Standing Committee work as well as other work to be done. Nine hon. Members in 10 or 99 out of a hundred are unable to take part in debates because so many wish to participate. Sitting here does not seem to be the most useful way for an hon. Member to use his time.

Mr. Sheldon: I agree. There is much work to do. We must see to correspondence and telephone calls and we look after our constituents in a way that our predecessors did not. However, something is being lost in that process, and anything that can be done to enable us to return to some aspect of what we had would be valuable.

Standing Order 20 debates are at the discretion of the Speaker. Madam Speaker rightly decides whether a specific and important matter should have urgent consideration. If she decides that they deserve priority, they are debated. In the past few years, there has been an increase in such debates, and we are grateful to Madam Speaker for making that improvement. The procedure had almost fallen into disuse until the past few years, and it has brought alive some of the important issues. Such rights are important, and whatever can be done to allow them to continue deserves our encouragement.

Select Committees are enormously important. Their great value is that they bring together people from all parts of the House to look at the facts. It is astonishing how well people can work together in areas of common interest. I shall give an extreme example: it is not typical by any means. The Public Accounts Committee operates like that. We looked at all the privatisations. There were enormous differences in Committee, but our remit was to see whether privatisation was carried out efficiently and gave proper value for money. The Government decision is not questioned. Such operations are evident in other Select Committees. Their members look at the facts and try to find how a process can be made more efficient. They may say, "The Government have got this wrong and should be doing more." A Select Committee's enormous advantage is being able to look at the facts and bring them to the attention of Ministers.

I have mentioned the areas in which I hope there will be some improvements. Obviously, we must continue to change to the advantage of hon. Members and that of our constituents.

8.23 pm

Sir Peter Emery (East Devon): In following the speech by the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon), I should like to mention one of the old traditions of the House, that in debates each speaker picked up points that the previous speaker had made. I should like to add to what the right hon. Gentleman said

about the problems and the development of taxation and tax legislation. He will recall that, just before Parliament dissolved for the election, we approved procedures to allow tax simplification Bills to be introduced to try to reduce the many orders on tax law. I hope that the Leader of the House will allow those procedures to operate as soon as possible.

I congratulate the Leader of the House on her appointment. I shall attempt to be non-partisan, with the exception of one matter, which I shall mention later. Many hon. Members want to play a political game, but many of us are honestly interested in trying to improve the way that Parliament operates and legislation is scrutinised. The right hon. Lady has heard me say many times that I have spent 14 years trying to drag our procedures screaming into the 20th century. If she can continue with that tradition into the 21st century, I shall be delighted.

We must proceed only with the agreement of the whole House. When that is not achieved, attempts at modernisation will frequently fail—the introduction of morning sittings in the 1960s is an illustration of that.

I shall now turn to the partisan matter, but I shall not dwell on it, because it is to be debated. The Leader of the House was ill advised to introduce the new format for Prime Minister's Question Time without consultation or consideration and against the recommendation of the Procedure Committee. On that Committee, four of her hon. Friends, one of whom is now a Minister, agreed with the recommendation that a new format was not to the advantage of the House. We shall return to that matter.

Mr. Connarty: The hon. Gentleman speaks about procedure and consultation. Does he not think that the new format is a vast improvement on the turmoil over the past five years during Prime Minister's questions?

Sir Peter Emery: The Procedure Committee made suggestions for improving Prime Minister's Question Time. However, they were not debated, because it was not the wish of the then Leader of the Opposition to move in the way that he has now moved. I have read to the House the letter that he wrote to the Committee.

The value of Prime Minister's Question Time derives from open-ended questions. In a debate with me on television, the new leader of the parliamentary Labour party spoke about questions in depth. When that happens, it will do away with the open-ended question and it will be an entirely different way to proceed. Judging by press comments on Prime Minister's questions, the new format is no better than the old one.

On two occasions, the Procedure Committee made recommendations about the timetabling of Bills. First, it recommended a legislation business committee. When that was debated, it faced the strongest opposition from all parts of the House that I have ever known. All the Front-Bench Labour spokesmen opposed it, and there was a one-line whip. The Government payroll vote turned out in full to defeat it. I remember that because it was debated on my birthday, and it was a birthday present of no great value after a great deal of work by the Procedure Committee.

The Committee took another sheet of paper and made further suggestions about the way that every part of legislation should be considered by Committees. There is

something wrong when only a third or even less of a Bill has been considered upstairs before returning to the House. We must find a way to overcome that. Perhaps the Leader of the House will ask the Committee that she proposes to set up to look at the final suggestion by the Procedure Committee. It set out a method by which such a problem could be dealt with in Committee by ensuring that every part of a Bill would be considered before it was reported. That is of considerable importance in improving the manner in which the House deals with legislation.

I ask the Leader of the House to look again at the work of the European Standing Committees. The Procedure Committee originally recommended that there should be five Committees, but only two were appointed. They have not functioned well, because the amount of work that two Committees have had to do on a range of subjects has been much too much for the people who have had to serve on them. We suggested five Committees on different subjects so that we could build up expertise on tax and trade in one Committee, agriculture in another, transport and other factors in another, and so on. We could have encouraged specialists on those subjects to serve on those European Standing Committees. At present, we almost have to drag people into serving on European Standing Committees because it is such a drudge. They should be a way of using the talents of the House better than they have used before.

Mr. Bernard Jenkin: As someone who served in the last Parliament for five years on European Standing Committee B, I endorse what my right hon. Friend says. Does he agree that there is something rather daft about a legislative process in which we discuss draft documents before Ministers go off to debate matters in the Council of Ministers and we never receive a report so that we can give a view on whether the deal that Ministers have concluded is right or wrong for this country? Does my right hon. Friend agree that, if we had more Committees, we could have time for a proper report from Ministers and time to cross-examine them so that they were properly brought to account on how they delivered what they told the Committee they would?

Sir Peter Emery: I accept what my hon. Friend says. There is no way of doing that if we have only two Committees, because they are permanently full of work and cannot check on what has been achieved. It would be to the benefit of the House and the country to know how the regulations were dealt with by Ministers in Europe.

I recommend to the Leader of the House other suggestions by the Procedure Committee on the way in which European business is dealt with. We went to the extent of recommending stronger links with the European Parliament. The one way in which the House of Commons can have influence on the way in which European legislation is passed is for it to influence the European Committees which deal with it. There could be a link between our Select Committees and European Committees so that European Committees know the views of the House. That does not happen at present.

I have suggested the appointment of—to use a European term—a rapporteur to each of the departmental Select Committees, whose job would be to be in touch with rapporteurs of similar Committees in the European Parliament so that we know what is going on. We should have a link so that we can influence their decisions at the

[*Sir Peter Emery*]

stage of drawing up reports, not after the rapporteur has made his report. That would give us some input into regulations that come out of Brussels such as we have never been able to achieve.

Other recommendations of the Procedure Committee, which again have not been debated, relate to the way in which we should scrutinise statutory instruments. It is—I was going to say criminal—lax beyond belief that, in the last Session of Parliament, we saw more than 2,200 pieces of secondary legislation. We spent all our time on the 22 Bills, but 26,000 pieces of secondary legislation slipped through with hardly any consideration. We have recommended a sifting Committee which could examine secondary legislation much more closely than we have ever done before. I hope that the Leader of the House will consider that in full.

I am a traditionalist and I do not mind admitting it, but I agree with what the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne said. Where the traditions of the House are useless and nonsense, let us not carry them forward. For example, do we really have to troop down to the House of Lords the first moment that a new Parliament meets for permission to elect a Speaker? Surely, as the primary Parliament of this nation, we should have the right to elect a Speaker. Then let us report to the monarch in the traditional way, and seek her approval. It is unnecessary for us to seek permission.

Mr. Maxton: Will the right hon. Gentleman extend his argument and ask why a Government elected by the people of this country should traipse down the Corridor to listen to the Queen tell us what we are going to do?

Sir Peter Emery: I happen to believe that some of the traditions of this country, which are admired throughout the world, attract tourism and are part of the strength and standing of Britain in the world, should be maintained. That is one, and I would not wish to see it abolished. I hope that there is some support for that position even on the Government Front Bench.

Mr. Winnick: As the right hon. Gentleman says, the Procedure Committee in the last Parliament made a recommendation which the Conservative Government would not accept—that we should not ask permission to elect a Speaker. I trust that the Labour Government—more radical than the last—will implement that recommendation. The right hon. Gentleman was honest enough to say that he was a traditionalist. Should not the House be a workplace? Why the wigs, why the gowns? What purpose do they serve? Parliament is not a tourist attraction. With the greatest respect to you, Madam Speaker, when the Deputy Speakers are in the Chair they wear modern dress, and they command the same respect as the Speaker. It is not necessary to dress up just because something happened 400 or 500 years ago. There is no need for the Clerks to wear gowns.

Sir Peter Emery: If I may say so, Madam Speaker, I do not consider the way you look in the Chair as dressing up. You bring dignity to this place, and do it with great charm.

We must help Scottish Members in a way in which my Government did not. It is right and proper that we should arrange the summer sittings to allow Scottish Members of

Parliament to spend some time with their family before their children go back to school. If that means that the House has to come back for two weeks—say, the second and third weeks of September—to complete some business, it would not be a bad thing and would accommodate an area of the country which is pretty set upon by the timing of the sittings of the House at present.

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley) *rose*—

Sir Peter Emery: I give way to my friend.

Mr. Pike: Apart from Scotland, many parts of Lancashire and other parts of the country have traditional wakes weeks. Burnley's holidays, for example, are the first fortnight in July. Those parts of the country are equally affected by the problem of the timing of the summer recess.

Sir Peter Emery: I knew that I would not have to say much about Lancashire because my hon. Friend, who has been a member of my Committee, has always stood up well and properly for the rights of Lancashire.

Might I also suggest to the President of the Council that she should look at Command Paper 397 which sets out the work of the Procedure Committee of the previous Parliament in which a number of her hon. Friends participated? That report contains a number of extra thoughts and ideas that are worthy of consideration. I hope that the new Committee, it will not be known as the Jopling Committee, but perhaps the Taylor Committee or whatever, will give some further thought to that report.

May I offer a revolutionary thought?

Sir Patrick Cormack: Be careful.

Sir Peter Emery: I would like to advocate the setting up of a parliamentary television channel. I believe that there is much more interest among the public about what happens in this House than we know. I accept that it might not be possible to show the work of the Select Committees at the time that they are sitting, but reports at other times of their work would be of interest to many of our constituents. They would also be interested in this type of debate, which would attract no attention on the normal television channels.

There is some considerable merit in us considering the establishment of a parliamentary television channel, even if it has to be managed or paid for by the House. It would be a great service to our constituents because it would enable them to see to a greater extent the work of Parliament. The broadcast of Prime Minister's Question Time gives a wrong impression of the work of the House and it would be useful if we could overcome it.

I wish the right hon. Lady well for the Committee that she sets up. I hope that perhaps I can make some contribution to it. If it operates according to the concept of working not in a party political manner on either side but for the greater benefit of the House as a whole, it will be a success.

8.42 pm

Mrs. Gwyneth P. Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): I had contemplated making a speech of four and a half hours on procedure, but somehow I suspect that I might

not be terribly popular. I will therefore be as brief as I can, but I believe that this happens to be one of the most important debates that we could have.

The procedures of this place are not just a matter of arcane debate, but the methods by which we pass laws. I hope that, when we come to debate any changes, we shall seriously consider not only what has gone before but the hazards that we sometimes face in seeking to modernise without totally understanding what we are doing.

For example, may I point out that the House actually sits fewer hours than it did before the Jopling report recommendations were accepted? It has abandoned the privilege, and an extremely hard-fought privilege, of Back-Bench Members having the right to introduce private Member's notions on a Friday and have votes on them in exchange for a number of hours of debate on a Wednesday morning. It is perfectly true that we were told, "Give up Fridays and you'll still have the same number of hours of debate," but it is also true that we do not have votes on Wednesday morning.

Individual constituency matters may be raised on a Wednesday morning, but, because we do not have such votes on Friday, we shall no longer be able to influence legislation such as that passed previously on abortion law and homosexual reform. Many of the Bills that were introduced in the first Parliament that I enjoyed as a Member would have faced considerable difficulties if an exchange had then been made between Fridays with voting rights for Wednesday morning debates. It is important that we realise that.

On the European Committees, it is not good enough simply to say that we should staff five more such Committees. Of course one could and one should, but Members must turn up and do the work. The House has to give those Committees the right, and not an alternative right, to bring a resolution to the Floor of the House and have it debated. At the moment, it does not matter how much work we do upstairs in those European Committees—no decision reached in Committee is brought back to the Floor of the House and voted on. No matter how strongly one may feel about any matter, that cannot influence the final result. It does not matter whether one has 10,000 connections with the European Parliament—no one will take any more notice than they do at the present time. It is important to realise that.

Above all, I would say to my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House that we should explain to people that one of the problems in the previous Parliament was its parliamentarians. We skip over that. If people sit in Committees and do not listen to what is said or take part in the amending resolutions, it does not matter how often we change where we sit or how many electronic toys we have. If that happens, it does not matter how many people we get rid of in exchange for a number of gadgets that somehow give the impression that we have been modernised. If we do not do the work, if we do not listen, participate or check what is happening at Government level as well as every other level, the House of Commons is the poorer for it.

I must also ask my right hon. Friend to look first at the role of Government. Look at why parliamentary draftsmen are not given enough time to come up with effective and properly drafted legislation. Look at why so many Committees in the House have to deal not only with existing legislation but with a thousand amendments

tabled by Ministers who are panicked at the final moment when they discover suddenly that the legislation says something different from what they expected it to say.

Those are important matters, and they will not be altered by saying to people they now have all sorts of new toys that they did not have before and that therefore they must have better control over the legislature. That is not what happens. Back Benchers have to look at everything that happens. They have to read it, and they must be very careful about understanding what it says. That must be done irrespective of the Government who are in power.

The House is very well served by servants of all types at every level. The people who service the House day by day in all its Departments are of an astonishingly high standard. We must stop treating them as though they were pawns to be moved around a chessboard without consultation, without understanding their problems and without allowing them a response. We must not think that it does not matter if we decide to do different hours and introduce different arrangements. We must not think that that is of no importance to the people who work here and who, after all, enjoy a lower level of consultation than we would accept in the worst sweatshop factory anywhere in our own constituencies. I find that offensive and unacceptable. I will not sit quietly by and see that happen.

I hope that it will be accepted by the House that even those of us who seem to be subject to the agist attack that we have been here a long time may have the odd word to say. We may not get in very often and we may take up rather more time than some of our colleagues would like, but we will have things to say about the procedures of the House of Commons because those very procedures, those Standing Orders—those very things that people do not read—are important. That failure to read means that some do not understand that sitting in a Committee does not mean just getting up and reading out a brief from a pressure group. It is not a matter of appearing whenever it suits someone, without considering in detail what is in front of him or her. It means doing a lot of work and considering the implications, and certainly the effects, of what we are doing.

Let me tell my right hon. Friend that some of us crusty, ancient, unhelpful Members, anti-social as we may be, will be around to make sure that the House of Commons still preserves the rights of Back Benchers.

8.48 pm

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): I am delighted to follow the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody), because I agree with every word she said. I hope to be able to pick up on one or two of the points that she made.

I agree with the hon. Lady about the role of private Members. I first came to the House in 1974. Perhaps I should explain to some hon. Members who might not be aware of it that I am the prize retread, because I was kicked out again and earned my living with a real job for 18 years before I came back in 1992. I agree with the hon. Lady that in that period there has been a diminution in the way in which the private Member can produce substantial and important legislation and take it through the House.

The role of the private Member's Bill must be re-examined with considerable urgency. Although I very much welcome what the Leader of the House has said this

[Mr. Paul Tyler]

evening and the intentions that she has expressed, it is an area about which hon. Members on both sides of the House share some concern. We seem to have pushed all those Bills into Fridays, when Government Whips can dispose of them all too easily when the shutters fall.

In response to the points made by the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich, my suggestion is that, instead of Wednesday mornings being taken up with constituency and other matters on which there are no votes—and which I know, from having participated, are good debates but with just a limited number of hon. Members involved—they should be used for private Member's Bills, when we are all here and can vote substantially on substantial issues.

The matters now taken on Wednesday mornings could be moved to Monday mornings. Those of us who want to raise particular questions, particular constituency interests or participate in a wider-ranging debate involving a small number of Members could attend on a Monday morning. We could get through such business on a Monday morning effectively and without the need for votes. It is a simple, practical suggestion which I offer to the Leader of the House.

The right hon. Lady has come to the House openly and honestly today. On behalf of the Government, she has said that it is a moment in time when this great institution should look at the way in which it operates to see whether we can measure up to our great history and our great potential. In that context, I looked up Edmund Burke, which is always useful:

"Parliament is not a congress of ambassadors from different and hostile interests; which interests each must maintain, as an agent and advocate, against other agents and advocates; but Parliament is a deliberative assembly of one nation, with one interest, that of the whole."

The hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich echoed that. We are a deliberative Assembly. Parliament has a glorious past; it is a glorious beast—but it is glorious because it has managed to move with the times, not because it has become stuck in a particular era. It is perfectly true that we have moved in technology, in economy and in culture, but we have not moved as fast or as far as the body politic. Surely that must be the question now hanging over the institution of Parliament.

During recent weeks, we have heard a great deal about the sovereignty of Parliament. The sovereignty of Parliament is far more at risk from getting out of step with the general body politic of the United Kingdom than it would ever be from threats from Brussels or anywhere else. The pace of progress has been far faster outside this place than it has been inside it. I ask the Leader of the House to look carefully at the way in which the House will have to change to reflect the situation in the world outside.

We are no longer a two-party state. To a considerable extent, we are still a two-party Parliament, but ever since the 1950s the majority of people in this country have not voted for the Government; they have not even necessarily voted for the two main parties in many parts of the country. During the past few days, I have been amused to see Conservative Members popping up like jacks-in-the-box complaining that the Government do not have a mandate because they got the support of only 43 per cent. of those who voted. I do not

remember hearing them complaining when the Thatcher Governments were elected on similar proportions but did not have a mandate.

Just this morning, the newly elected chairman of the 1922 Committee made such a complaint. I welcome him to the ranks of those who support electoral reform, although I am not sure whether it will be of much help to the cause to have his support.

As my hon. Friend the Member for St. Ives (Mr. George) said in a notable, passionate maiden speech, the people of Cornwall managed to become the first Celtic country to be a Tory-free zone. We were followed later by Wales and Scotland. Now, members of the Conservative party in those areas are complaining that they have no influence over the election of the next Leader of the Opposition. I have news for them—whatever it is will not be Leader of the Opposition for long, because we shall take over the opposition role. In the meantime, it is an obvious absurdity that we have an electoral system in which a substantial number of votes in the Celtic countries are not reflected in the House. That is also true across the country. Until 1 May, large areas of the country were not represented in this place if people happened to vote for the Labour party. That cannot be right.

I welcome the fact that the Government have made it absolutely clear that they will move forward and look at the whole question of the status of this elected Assembly, how it operates and how representative it is. The Home Secretary's statement in the debate on Monday—that there will be rapid progress on an electoral commission and that its remit and membership will be decided before the summer recess—is a great step forward.

I am a beneficiary of the first-past-the-post system. When I first came to this House, I had a majority of nine, after six recounts. On the morning of 2 May, my majority had risen to almost 14,000. Therefore, I do not complain out of self-interest. The British people have a right to complain that they are not getting the elected Assembly to which they are entitled, and that we come here with a damaged mandate.

Of course, the symbolism is attractive to tourists, but for goodness sake let us not worry about whether the Clerks wear wigs or whether we have to walk up and down a Corridor—that is peripheral; that is a triviality. The key issue is whether we are doing our job properly.

The trenchant contributions, from both sides of the House, on the extent to which we are currently scrutinising European legislation are extremely important. I sat on the Procedure Committee and we did some work on that matter. I am staggered by the weight of work load suffered by some of our colleagues on Committees. It cannot go on, because our constituents are getting a bad bargain as a result.

I very much welcomed the speech of the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon), the Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee. I thought his expert contribution to our discussion about how we timetable the taxation and expenditure plans of the nation was absolutely right. We should consider that matter carefully.

The very shape of this place must be considered carefully. On a previous occasion, I opened a debate, on behalf of my Liberal Democrat colleagues, and pointed out that, were it not for the historical accident that Edward VI had a redundant chapel available for the House of Commons of the day to sit in, we would not have the

absurd adversarial system we have in this place. Similarly, if the French had not had the redundant royal tennis court, they might have ended up like us and we might have ended up like them. The Americans would have followed suit.

We have to think carefully about how this place operates. It is absurd that so many Labour Members are trying to get on to the Labour Benches—and not just absurd, but uncomfortable. We must find a way of utilising the Cross Benches: bring in the carpenters and make this not only a better representative Assembly, but one in which we can operate to more effect.

What about the usual channels? As Liberal Democrat Chief Whip, I am a new, third major channel in this place. However, on behalf of Back Benchers and the minority parties, I have to say that the usual channels are a great mystery. I am sure that we could bring more out into the open and that more could be done in the new triangle between the three parties. We must ensure that Back Benchers and the minority parties have the opportunity to affect that situation. The tripartite arrangement is a step in the right direction, but it is not sufficient.

I am sure that we shall have to find ways to relieve the Speaker and Deputy Speakers of the difficult job that they have to do in making the arithmetical assessments across the Floor of the House in every debate as they try to work out who should speak, how and when. It is an unfair burden to place on the Speaker and Deputy Speakers, and we should not expect them to perform those gymnastics. We must look again at the Standing Orders. Perhaps we can learn something from the other place, where a simple system seems to work well.

All those issues are matters for the whole House. While it is important that the new Committee should have as wide a remit as possible, it would be wrong to ask its members to go into such detail, over such a length of time, that no progress was made in the House. I hope that the Leader of the House will agree that the new Committee could make proposals, as the Procedure Committee has previously, but not attempt to make a wide range of recommendations on every issue. It is particularly important to address the concerns of current Back Benchers, a great many of whom would otherwise feel frozen out of the true business of Parliament.

In a document entitled "A Parliament for the People", my party produced an extensive report on some detailed issues. The group was chaired by a distinguished former servant of the House, the former Clerk, Mr. Michael Ryle, and the proposals in the document have been well thought through. I hope that, by handing it over to the new Committee, we can ensure that all the minor, but important, matters are carefully considered.

It would be easy to get bogged down in the trivialities of who knocks on which door and what they wear, but our constituents deserve better. It is significant that the Press Gallery is almost empty; it is a sad reflection of the media's interest in the way this place works. We have to look to ourselves to improve it and to ensure that the media—and through them, the public—recognise that this is a great institution with a great role to play.

9 pm

Dr. Phyllis Starkey (Milton Keynes, South-West): I am grateful for the opportunity to make my maiden speech when you, Madam Speaker, are in the Chair, given your other role as chancellor of the Open university, which is one of Milton Keynes's greatest exports.

I should like to start my parliamentary career in a relatively traditional way and speak of my predecessors who have represented the seat successively known as Buckingham, Milton Keynes and, since 1992, Milton Keynes, South-West. As well as being constituency Members of Parliament of merit, they have had unusual careers.

Two of my predecessors changed political parties. Aidan Crawley was elected as the first Labour Member of Parliament for Buckingham in 1945. He lost the seat and was elected elsewhere as a Conservative Member of Parliament. Sir Frank Markham, having been a Labour Member of Parliament and a parliamentary private secretary to Ramsay MacDonald, was elected as Conservative Member of Parliament for Buckingham. He is well known in the locality: not only was a school named after him, but he wrote a seminal work, a history of Milton Keynes, which I commend to hon. Members.

Two of my other predecessors gained notoriety owing to allegations of financial and/or electoral irregularity: Robert Maxwell and my immediate predecessor, Barry Legg. I pay tribute to Mr. Legg for his work on the Treasury Select Committee and for introducing a private Member's Bill on the control of drugs in nightclubs just before the last election.

My other predecessor, Bill Benyon, was the Conservative Member of Parliament for Buckingham from 1970-83 and the first Member of Parliament for Milton Keynes, from 1983-92. He is a particularly apt role model to cite in today's debate. He was an excellent constituency Member of Parliament and, when announcing in 1992 that he would not stand again after 22 years of service, he said:

"I am very disillusioned. One of my interests in Parliament was trying to reform its archaic procedures."

I hope that, in my time as the Member of Parliament for Milton Keynes, South-West, we shall succeed in reforming the archaic procedures of Parliament and that I can therefore be a worthy successor to Bill Benyon.

My constituency is one half of the city of Milton Keynes. It combines the older centres of Stony Stratford, Wolverton and Bletchley with the much newer communities of Loughton and Woughton. The importance of excellent transport links to Milton Keynes is emphasised by the fact that there are four railway stations in my constituency, not all of which I use all the time.

As a scientist, I am proud of the importance of science, engineering and technology to industrial innovation in Milton Keynes. Wolverton is the home of the railway engineering works where the royal train used to be kept. Bletchley is famous for Bletchley Park where, during the second world war, the Enigma codes were broken using Colossus, the world's first computer, which fills a room about half the size of the Chamber. I am hopeful that under this Government Bletchley Park will succeed in its lottery bid to fund the museum and employment scheme at that important historic site.

Milton Keynes is a unique place: it is the only new city in the United Kingdom and is built, as those hon. Members who have visited it will know, on an American grid system with extensive environmental landscaping. It has a young population and is an optimistic and forward-looking place. Most of the residents have positively chosen to live there, in the expectation that their lives would be made better. Milton Keynes was, to some extent, failed by the previous Government in that its

[Dr. Phyllis Starkey]

growth should have been complete by now. It should have a population of 250,000, but actually has fewer than 200,000, and 17 per cent. of the land is undeveloped.

My constituents and those in the other half of Milton Keynes are looking to Labour's policies to provide the environment in which Milton Keynes can develop, in particular to give us the stability and the investment in education and training on which our business growth depends. Businesses in Milton Keynes have frequently told me that their growth is held back by skills shortages, yet, at the same time, 3,000 school leavers come on to the job market every year in Milton Keynes and there are 800 unemployed under-25s. I hope that Labour's policies will bring those two problems together and will give our young people the opportunity to participate in the city's growth while allowing businesses to fuel further growth.

As befits a new city, the people of Milton Keynes take a fresh approach to problem solving—they are not hidebound by tradition—and I shall cite two examples. First, our businesses have joined the chamber of commerce with the training and enterprise council and the representatives of business on that chamber are elected by businesses in Milton Keynes. The unitary council in Milton Keynes and the chamber work closely together and are jointly committed both to economic development and to combating inequality. Businesses in Milton Keynes understand that only an inclusive society that uses the talents of everyone can provide an environment in which business can flourish.

The second example is in education: all the secondary schools in Milton Keynes, whether grant maintained or not, work together co-operatively. That might have something to do with the fact that the city's grant-maintained schools went grant-maintained so as to remain comprehensive schools and to avoid being forced to become selective by the county council, which then controlled them.

My electors voted for me because they wanted me to be part of a parliamentary Labour party that delivered on Labour's promises, as well as wanting me to represent their interests. They expect parliamentary procedures to facilitate the process of government and the implementation of the Government's programme, while including the proper safeguards for the Opposition to scrutinise that legislation. From speaking to my constituents on their doorsteps, I know that they are not always impressed by what they see on television or by some of the legislation that has emerged from Parliament. The obvious recent example of the latter was the legislation that gave us the Child Support Agency which, within a couple of days of my election, was furnishing the vast majority of the complaints that I received from constituents.

Another reason I have for stating why I think the procedures of the House need amending has to do with the sort of people who seek election as Members of Parliament. A good feature of this Parliament is that it is somewhat more representative of the population at large than previous Parliaments—obviously, I am referring to the number of women Members—but it is still not very representative of the population at large in terms of gender, ethnicity, social class or life experience. Many people are put off even thinking about becoming Members of Parliament because of the procedures of this place, so that is another good reason for changing them.

At risk of being controversial, which I know I am not supposed to do in my maiden speech, I have to say that I do not find the adversarial atmosphere of the House to be particularly helpful or conducive to constructive debate. We need to consider changing the way in which the House operates. In addition to suggestions made by hon. Members who have already spoken, I suggest that some sort of time limit on speeches might be quite helpful. I strongly agree with the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler) that we should consider the physical arrangements of the House. It is ridiculous that Labour Members cannot sit on the Opposition Benches below the Gangway without people starting to think that, emulating my two predecessors, they have changed party.

I commend to the House the attitude of the people in Milton Keynes: that we should concentrate on how best to achieve the desired outcome and that we should be prepared to think anew without being bound by tradition. I hope that the House will do it in a shorter time than 22 years.

9.9 pm

Mr. Robert Jackson (Wantage): Procedure is an arcane topic. In a venerable institution such as the House of Commons, it is liable to be taken for granted, with only a small group of procedural experts refining the details of ancient custom and practice while the rest of us get on with what we want to do under the rules as we find them.

The danger in that is that our House of Commons will fail to move with the times. Like the hon. Member for Milton Keynes, South-West (Dr. Starkey), whom I congratulate on her elegant maiden speech, I am not a procedural expert, but I envisage three dangers in the discussions.

One danger is that, in our self-satisfaction with our 700 years of history, broadening down from precedent to precedent, we shall fail to pay regard to the way in which bodies like ours function elsewhere—sometimes better than we do. Another is that we shall tend to regard small innovations as huge breakthroughs, which is how I would characterise the establishment view of the Select Committees. The third danger is that we shall tend to make the changes that we do make in a such a piecemeal fashion that the ramifications and interactions of those changes are never fully worked out in advance.

For those reasons, I enthusiastically support the Government's proposal for a new Select Committee on Procedure. Such a Committee could and should help us to overcome the dangers that I have mentioned. It goes without saying that the Government must carry all parties in the House with them in the reform of its procedures; but the huge majority that the Government currently have gives them an historic opportunity and a major incentive to undertake extensive procedural developments.

The opportunity lies in the fact that the Government have such a big majority that they can afford to create new procedures, offering a chance of genuine pluralism in our debates and decision making. The incentive is that, if they fail to do so, they will soon encounter serious demoralisation—and worse—on their Back Benches.

I suppose that most new Labour Members, like Conservative Members, have entered Parliament, not only determined to give of their best in the public service, but wholly persuaded that theirs will be more than a full-time job. It remains to be seen how they will feel when they

discover the facts of life under our existing procedures. They will be lucky to catch Madam Speaker's eye more than once a month or so at Question Time, and perhaps once every six months for a debate in the Chamber, with an audience of about 10 colleagues.

They will not be selected to serve on the Standing Committees of Bills in respect of which their expertise makes them too keen to serve, and when they are summoned to Standing Committee duty they will be told by their Whips that speeches are unwelcome—that has been mentioned several times tonight—so it will be a good opportunity for them to catch up with constituency correspondence.

If they happen to be one of the minority summoned to serve on a Select Committee—probably one on a subject on which they are not too conveniently well-informed—they will find that it takes months for the Government to respond to their reports, and that when they do, they show scant regard for their labours.

Perhaps I have been exaggerating for effect, but Members who have been in the House for some time know that there is a large measure of truth in the sombre picture that I have painted. What should we do about it?

I shall make a concrete proposal in a moment, but to lead into it, let me return to what I said about piecemeal changes whose full ramifications are not thought through.

The starting point of all our procedural debates should be the so-called Jopling reforms of the last Parliament, which have been mentioned. These welcome changes reflected the reality that hon. Members were no longer willing to sustain the pretence that open-ended debates and the archaic ritual of the all-night sitting offered effective parliamentary control over the Executive.

The truth is that the Jopling reforms went only half the distance. They dismantled one admittedly obsolete system of parliamentary influence—that which was based on the struggle for parliamentary time—but failed to erect an alternative system. The net effect is that Parliament is now even weaker vis-à-vis the Executive than before. The challenge to us in this Parliament is surely to build that alternative system for which Jopling created the space.

I urge the House to take to heart the other dangers that I have mentioned in our time-honoured approach to procedural reform: our complacency about the way in which other Parliaments—I have heard them referred to here as lesser Parliaments—work. I believe that we have much to learn from them. In a modern legislature, the main source of parliamentary influence over the Executive is to be found in the structures of institutionalised pluralism and a diversity of centres of influence which have to be negotiated with and operated by a well-informed and professionally disciplined cadre of Members. The best way to ensure that—as we can see by looking at Parliaments on the continent of Europe, in the United States and in the Commonwealth—is to rebuild our parliamentary life around an array of powerful subject-specialist committees.

My proposal, accordingly, is that we do away with the existing Standing Committees and Select Committees. Our Standing Committees are constituted ad hoc for particular legislation so that there is no continuity of membership or accumulation of expertise in them. Their membership is determined in reality by agents of the Executive in the Whips Office. Their Chairmen are limited to a purely procedural role which denies them any influence over policy.

Our Select Committees, meanwhile, do not compensate for these deficiencies. Their membership is once again controlled by the Whips and, more fundamentally, their arduous investigations are wholly disconnected from the legislative process, so that they have no levers with which to give practical effect to such expertise as they may develop. To replace these arrangements, we need a new unified Committee structure—a system of specialist Committees, each with its own subject area. By the way, these should not be limited to particular Departments of the Government.

The Committees should be constituted at the beginning of each Parliament, and every Member of Parliament who is not a member of the Government should be a member of at least one of those Committees. Their composition must reflect the balance of the House, but although the Whips will have a hand in deciding who goes where, their influence will be much diminished by the fact that all Members must be found a place. Each Committee should choose its own Chairman and Vice-Chairman to serve for at least two years under an overall agreement, giving a fair share of these positions to each party.

The task of these specialist Committees should include the conduct of investigations into whatever area of policy they choose within their remit—that is the function of the existing Select Committees. They should include also the detailed scrutiny of all legislation—primary and secondary, national and European—falling within their remit. That is the function of the present Standing Committees.

In both functions—the investigative and the legislative—they should be led not by Ministers, but by hon. Members of whatever party who are chosen by the Committee to serve as rapporteurs on a particular subject or a particular Bill. Rapporteurs should assist in another function that I see the new Committees performing—scrutinising expenditure on policies within their field of reference. That is a task that—with all respect to the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon)—I believe the existing Public Accounts Committee does not have the subject-based expertise to perform.

The arrangements that I am suggesting would give every Back Bencher a serious job to do and would ensure that Members were much better informed and up to date in their knowledge than they can hope to be under our present system. They would create in the institutional esprit de corps of each Committee and in the persons of its Chairman, Vice-Chairman and rapporteur the genuinely pluralistic network of diffused centres of influence which is the only viable basis for an effective modern legislature.

In concluding, let me briefly address two words to Front-Bench Members on both sides of the House about the implications for them of the radical procedural change that I suggest. To my right hon. Friends on the Opposition Front Bench, let me freely admit that my suggestion will make it much more difficult to pursue the traditional line that the Opposition's duty is to oppose. Is it not time to recognise not only that that approach has always been something of a myth, but that it is now a wholly discredited myth in the public mind? An increasingly well-informed public look to us for constructive debate and a focus on the detailed improvement of legislation and its implementation, not for the impotent posturing that our traditional structures encourage.

[Mr. Robert Jackson]

To right hon. Members on the Government Front Bench, let me say that my proposal may look like a great renunciation of Executive power—the Government's power always to get their way in the House of Commons without negotiation. That would indeed be so, but the prize for the Executive is worth it. The prize will be Government legislation that reflects a more genuine and solidly based consent than it enjoys at present—legislation that enjoys the reinforced legitimacy that can come only from a Parliament that is seen to work in ways that command the public's respect.

9.20 pm

Mr. Paul Flynn (Newport, West): I shall not follow the hon. Member for Wantage (Mr. Jackson) in his interesting and radical suggestions, which I hope the Committee will study in detail, but shall follow up the contribution made by my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes, South-West (Dr. Starkey). I hope that she and all the other new Back Benchers find the same joy and fulfilment as I have found as a Back Bencher by choice over the past seven years. Sadly, they might be Back Benchers by the arithmetic of this place.

My hon. Friend illustrated two main changes in this place. She speaks as a scientist, and the House has had a tradition of being scarcely scientifically literate. If we can get our decisions on to a basis of scientific reasoning, it would be a major leap forward.

She made another profound point. When I was a junior Back-Bench spokesman, I served with a senior Front-Bench spokesman who was a man, and then with two senior Front-Bench spokesmen who were women. There was an enormous difference between those two roles. With the male senior spokesman, our role was confrontational and challenging. We debated for hours, sometimes all through the night, but achieved very little. With the women spokesmen, there was reasoning between the two sides. We identified crucial areas and discussed them at a time of day when we were not exhausted. The influx of more than 100 women Members of Parliament will change this place utterly.

We take great pride in the mother of Parliaments but, as many hon. Members have said, Parliament's image outside is quite different. People regard the mother of Parliaments as becoming debauched by corruption, which is greatly exaggerated, and growing a little senile. We must look to those barriers and to our understanding of the work of this place.

The reason for early-day motion No. 5, which suggested something entirely new, is that hon. Members with declarable financial interests should not serve on Committees that cover that area. There is a good reason for that. If we look critically at how Select Committees have worked, many, such as the one mentioned by my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon), the distinguished Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee, have served us extremely well.

Others have not. They have divided regularly on party political lines in every report. Their reports do not have the respect of the House or the country. Others have divided on vested interests. I shall not mention those vested interests but, if half the Committee has financial interests in MegaGreed plc and the other half has vested

interests in the Coathangers Union, the two sides clash and objective reasoning has no chance of dominating and determining the outcome of the Committee. It just depends on the strength of the two vested interests.

In this brief contribution, I shall point to some of the ways in which I think we should go forward. Some have been mentioned, and I will not repeat them.

We must look critically at the work of all the Select Committees. Often, they under-achieve. Our cross-examination of witnesses is not as professional and as hard as it should be. For a great deal of time, we are not doing detailed work on the Committee. Select Committees are often dominated by advisers and others, rather than by Members. There is a huge area in which that valuable work can be enlarged.

The Standing Committees are an ossified foolishness. I was delighted by what the hon. Member for Wantage said. We must look at them in a new way. I went through those two Committee reports in great detail with a person who wrote a book about the way in which we run our Committees.

I do not think that anyone now admits to serving on the Committee that considered the Bill establishing the Child Support Agency, because of the results of it. The problem was not that members of the Committee did not foresee difficulties arising from that legislation, but that they focused on the wrong ones—on problems that did materialise, but the enormous problems that emerged were not considered by the Committee.

We must re-examine that and various other Bills. We have all experienced the terrible frustration of serving on Committees, tabling amendments, arguing for hour after hour and finding nothing was accepted.

Mr. Robert Jackson: The hon. Gentleman mentioned the case of the Child Support Agency, and he referred to it earlier in an intervention as an example of confrontation. I, too, looked at the proceedings because, like everyone else, I have been struck by the amazing number of complaints that have been generated. Actually, it was an extremely consensual process in the Standing Committee. That is a jolly good example of the way in which the consensual process can go wrong, but the real moral of that story is that the Bill should have been put through a process of examination by experts and discussion with witnesses. That would have produced the kind of evidence that would have enabled a serious discussion to take place in Standing Committee.

Mr. Flynn: I agree entirely with the hon. Gentleman that the matter should have been approached in a different way.

I shall make two final points, as I know that many other hon. Members want to speak. We must enlarge the great work carried out by the Public Accounts Committee. It does a marvellous job, but covers only a tiny part—perhaps one seventieth—of the work that should be covered. Rather than a sub-committee structure, I would prefer a subject-matter structure. There are enormous opportunities for Back Benchers to do serious, worthwhile work.

We must rediscover the traditional role of Back Benchers—the Sydney Silvermans, the Leo Abses—who challenged conventional bigotry and ignorance. We have seen the tabloidisation of politics, where political parties

have been far too interested in pleasing the writers of editorials in the *Daily Mirror* and the *Daily Mail*, instead of creating genuinely innovative policies. Those policies will come from the Back Benches. We must rediscover that role by allowing genuine chances for Back Benchers to get their own legislation through.

I am sure that this will be a great Parliament—a Parliament different from any in our history, that will achieve great reforms. We must ensure that by reinforcing the role of the Back Benchers and by blazing new trails.

9.27 pm

Mrs. Teresa Gorman (Billericay): I should like to recommend some practical ideas to the Leader of the House from the perspective especially of newcomers to the House. We can all remember when we were newcomers. I should like her to pay particular attention to some kind of induction course or training course for newcomers. Many new Members wander round this place for months, if not years, not knowing what goes on and not understanding the jargon used in the Chamber.

This evening, for example, SO 20s were mentioned by a distinguished Member, the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon), who has been here many years and has, no doubt, introduced many SO 20s, whatever they are—I do not know what they are, even now. It would be enormously helpful for new Members to understand such things.

Many hon. Members do not even understand how to get their name called in the Chamber. Some who may not have been paying a great deal of attention to the debate but perhaps watching the Chair may have seen me sidle up to the Speaker a little while ago. I was trying to discover whether it was worth my while staying in the Chamber till the end of this extremely interesting debate and whether I was likely to be called. Madam Speaker rightly pointed out to me that I had not submitted my name in advance.

Madam Speaker: Then Madam Speaker said, "Go and sit down and wait your turn."

Mrs. Gorman: Madam Speaker was quite correct—I was about to come to that point. New Members of Parliament may not know that: they may sit in their places for many hours without being called because they are not aware of that simple protocol.

As the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne said, newcomers have a great deal to contribute to Parliament, but preference is given to seniority in debates, so new Members may not be called to speak. I remember sitting through five days of Budget debate without being called. That was very frustrating. Although it is natural that seniority should command respect, I have pointed out to the Speaker that Privy Councillors and Chairmen of Committees are called to speak in the House more often, which means that Back Benchers have fewer opportunities to speak. Madam Speaker referred me to the Leader of the House—then Tony Newton—who assured me that he did not necessarily want senior Members of Parliament to have special privileges. There was some difference of opinion about the issue.

New Members of Parliament do not know about those little dodges. In my house, I have a very helpful booklet on "household tips and wrinkles". I think that a House of Commons book of "tips and wrinkles" might help many newcomers.

I nipped out of the Chamber a little while ago. When I popped back in, I saw that Madam Speaker had noted my absence. I do not know why she thought I left the Chamber, but I went to get a list of Members. I knew that, if I were called to speak, I might want to refer to an hon. Member in the Chamber and it is the tradition to refer to hon. Members by their constituencies. The Leader of the House raised that issue briefly, and I have great sympathy for her point of view.

Although I know the name of the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne, I am not allowed to call him by name; I must refer to his constituency. I know that there are good reasons for that practice, but it causes confusion for hon. Members who wish to speak spontaneously while referring to other hon. Members and addressing their points of view. I urge the right hon. Lady not to be dissuaded from examining that matter. When there are many Members of Parliament, not just new Members but long-standing Members can take a long time to learn all the constituency names.

The Prime Minister said that Members of Parliament are the servants, not the masters, of the people. There is a tendency for hon. Members to employ friends or family members in their offices. When considering disposing of their office allowances, hon. Members should bear in mind that their decision may cause comment. Remarks have been made in the past about nepotism in the system, which may be inappropriate and is sometimes picked up by our electors.

Nepotism is a disease that goes hand in hand with privilege. There was a classic local council case recently—in Monklands—when 32 members of the same family were employed by that council. That example was raised many times in the House. I would prefer to see Parliament not choosing the individuals, but arranging for secretaries and other staff and allotting their salaries. That would alleviate any charges of nepotism, in which hon. Members have the opportunity to indulge in this place.

9.35 pm

Mr. Andrew F. Bennett (Denton and Reddish): In a sense, the hon. Member for Billericay (Mrs. Gorman) gave the message away. It was apparent that she was keen to enter the Chamber to speak, but not to listen. That is one of the fundamental problems in this place. Too many hon. Members want to make their speeches but not to listen to others. If that is all that we want to do, why do we not all line up and make our speeches simultaneously? It is crucial that we listen to other hon. Members' speeches. It was a privilege to be in the Chamber to listen to my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes, South-West (Dr. Starkey). She made an excellent speech and I look forward to hearing her on many more occasions.

I wish that my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House had started her speech by placing rather more emphasis on good scrutiny of legislation. There are some who suspect that the Government want to get their business through more quickly than has happened hitherto. If we are to have better scrutiny, it must be accepted that that will make life harder for Ministers, and especially hard for Government Whips. The long-term gain will be evident a considerable time later when we are seen to put better legislation on the statute book and conduct better government.

I press it upon my right hon. Friend that, when we change our formal procedures, we must also consider the informal. No doubt most people will judge the changes to

[Mr. Andrew F. Bennett]

Prime Minister's Question Time by what happens in the Chamber. I suggest that we should consider also what happens outside. Does the change to Prime Minister's questions means that fewer Ministers will come to the House on Tuesdays and Thursdays so that they might be lobbied by their colleagues and others? Let us balance the formal by considering also the informal.

I shall present briefly a shopping list of the things that I would like at least to be considered. First, there are constitutional matters. It is a bit of a cheek for the Opposition to get hot and bothered about constitutional matters being taken on the Floor of the House after they, while in government, pushed through the poll tax, which in many ways denied many people their right to vote. That legislation was, of course, considered in Committee.

If the Opposition want constitutional matters to be considered on the Floor of the House, it would be sensible to consider sitting on Tuesday and Thursday mornings. The Wednesday experiment has proved that that can be done. The argument against Wednesday sittings was that we might have votes, which would make life difficult for Ministers and for part-time Members. Probably even the Conservative party cannot afford now to have part-timers. I think that almost all my right hon. and hon. Friends gave a clear commitment during the election campaign that they would be full-time Members.

We can make use of the mornings and I think that we can have Divisions during those sittings. My hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) said that one concession reached in establishing Wednesday morning sittings was that Back-Bench Members would not move motions. I think that that right should be restored at the earliest opportunity so that we can have the ensuing debates on a Wednesday morning or at some other time.

It is important that there is interchange during debates on the Floor of the House. If there is to be an interchange, there must be interventions. I approve of the 10-minute rule, which is designed to reduce the length of speeches, but I plead with you, Madam Speaker, to consider whether we can have injury time for interventions. That allowance was recommended by the Procedure Committee. It would bring back the idea of debate and make it clear that we do not just sit in our places doing nothing but can be involved in interruptions that are of some use.

It is important that we establish some ad hoc Select Committees. I plead for some regional Select Committees. We shall be giving new powers to regional Assemblies in Scotland and Wales, and surely the English regions have rights as well. The establishment of Select Committees to reflect the English regions would be extremely useful.

I hope that there will be many more opportunities to scrutinise proposed legislation. It is important that a Select Committee should be able to examine a Bill before its parliamentary passage begins. Consideration on Report has become a farce. There is a mixture of major issues and detailed Government amendments. Those amendments should be considered on recommitment.

A substantial agenda needs to be considered. I hope that the House will act quickly in setting up the proposed Committee. I hope also that the Committee will work quickly and that, by this time next year, we shall see the fruits of its labour.

9.39 pm

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): Owing to your good offices, Madam Speaker, and that of the Leader of the House and of my right hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Mr. Goodlad), it has been decided that there will not be winding-up speeches from Front Benchers—rather, that two Back Benchers will have the opportunity to say a few words. I hope that that is a happy precedent.

I add my tributes to those already paid to the hon. Member for Milton Keynes, South-West (Dr. Starkey), who made a most eloquent and interesting contribution. I could not pretend to agree with everything that she said, and I would just urge a little caution in wanting to change too much too quickly, but by the same token it is helpful for those of us who have been here a long time to hear the perceptive comments of a highly intelligent newcomer who has obviously taken a lot of trouble to try to size the place up. I am sure that we will hear much more from her. It would be admirable if she, or one or two newer Members, had the opportunity to participate in the Committee that the House will shortly set up.

The Leader of the House is, perhaps, braver than she realises, because at the heart of the debate is the classic dichotomy: we do not have a separation of powers. Many of the Parliaments to which my hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (Mr. Jackson) referred in his interesting speech have a separation of powers, where the Executive is not drawn from the legislature. I know that there are some that do not—

Mr. Robert Jackson *rose*—

Sir Patrick Cormack: Briefly.

Mr. Jackson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way, but that simply is not the case. He is thinking of the United States, but the Federal Republic of Germany, a number of continental countries and Commonwealth countries have systems very similar to ours, and their Parliaments operate more effectively, I believe, because they are committee-based, in the way that I suggested.

Sir Patrick Cormack: Yes, indeed. There are some Parliaments like ours, but equally there are a number that have a separation of powers. It is not just the United States where that exists.

When I talk about the essential dichotomy, I mean that the right hon. Lady, in her capacity as a leading Member of the Government, is understandably anxious to get Government business through—she is anxious that there should be many Bills, to which Labour referred in its election manifesto and to which it feels morally committed—but to get business through and to have it properly scrutinised, which is the keynote in this debate, is a problem.

The right hon. Lady has the luxury of an enormous majority. Many hon. Members who have come into the House for the first time will not have the opportunity in the lifetime of this Parliament to have Government office, or even properly to aspire to it. We should remember that being in the House is itself sufficient of a challenge and reward. It is a great pity to come into the House with a mental picture of a chauffeur-driven Montego, a Dispatch Box, or whatever.

For us to be here, to take part in the debates, to scrutinise and to subject the Government to detailed examination is in itself a great task. That is why our constituents have sent us here. We should seek so to change our procedures that it is easier properly to scrutinise the legislation that the Government produce. That is the object of Parliament. Parliament does not govern; it scrutinises legislation.

I warmly welcome everything that the right hon. Lady said about Special Standing Committees and the opportunity to see draft legislation. In an earlier intervention, when she was gracious enough to give way, I referred to my experience as a Chairman of Committees. I have had the honour of chairing many Standing Committees. It is a fascinating task and one that I greatly enjoy, but I am bound to say that I frequently sit in the Chair and feel very frustrated indeed. As was rightly said, the Chairman can play no part in the deliberations. He just sits there and is all too conscious that, time after time, almost no Government Back Benchers get up and say anything at all.

That is not a criticism of my party, so recently in government. I was here in 1970. I sat on Committees when my right hon. Friend the Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Sir E. Heath)—the Father of the House—Lord Wilson and Lord Callaghan were Prime Ministers, and it was always the same. The Government were so anxious to get their legislation through that the Whips told the Government Back Benchers on Committees that their job was to keep their heads down. Only occasionally is there a Committee where that is not the norm.

I hope that the new procedural Committee which is to be set up will look with enormous care and diligence at how we can so timetable Bills as to change that system. Every Government Back Benchers in this Parliament who is appointed to a Committee should feel free to take part in debates. The luxury of the Labour party's large majority should allow the Leader of the House and her colleagues in the Whips Office to be rather more flexible and to allow a little dissent. There is nothing healthier than dissent. Infallibility is not automatically conferred on Governments.

I have frequently, and to my cost, because I have never made a speech from either Dispatch Box, sought to take issue with my Government. The poll tax legislation has been referred to during the evening. I did not cast one vote in its favour. Indeed, I voted against it on every conceivable occasion.

Mr. Maxton: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir Patrick Cormack: No, I am sorry, I do not have much time.

I hope that Government Back Benchers will take that as an example and feel free properly to scrutinise and criticise the legislation before them.

Select Committees do extremely valuable work, but it would be enormously to the advantage of Parliament if every major Select Committee report had to be at least briefly debated on the Floor during a parliamentary year. Great work is put into those Committees. Sometimes their findings are of enormous importance, yet the rest of the House has little or no opportunity to deliberate on their findings. We should consider setting aside more days to debate Select Committee reports. If that restricts the amount of legislation, that in itself would be a good thing,

because too much legislation inevitably means that there is sloppily drafted legislation and more danger of bad legislation.

I should like to think that, in our joint desire to see the Chamber more populated more often, we might consider so organising the Committee system that we have perhaps one day when Committees have priority and the Chamber meets just briefly in the afternoon. That might free hon. Members to be in the Chamber more on other occasions. This should be the cockpit of the nation, where hon. Members feel that they have a prime duty to be in attendance.

I was much taken by the excellent speech of the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon), the Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee, when he talked about the count. Perhaps that is something that we should consider bringing back. We should also consider stricter enforcement of the convention of a discipline whereby, if an hon. Member is to take part in a debate, he or she is present virtually throughout it. That would help enormously because it would encourage true debating. Hon. Members would be here, they would listen and they would be able to take part. I very much agree with the right hon. Gentleman's point about injury time, because the cut and thrust of debate is of its very essence.

I am conscious that I must give the hon. Member for Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush (Mr. Soley) at least as much time as I have had, so I conclude by saying that I hope that the Leader of the House will give careful thought to the structure not only of the parliamentary week but of the parliamentary year. I realise that it would probably be difficult to effect much of a change this year, but I hope that next year there will be change. I hope that, in the autumn, the right hon. Lady will, in effect, give us a parliamentary calendar for the year.

Of course, it would have to be subject to change in an emergency. During the time I have been in the House, Parliament has been recalled several times. It is absolutely right that it should be recalled on occasions such as the Gulf war, the Falklands conflict and major crises in Northern Ireland. Every Government must have the right to do that, but I should like a more structured parliamentary year.

We have heard some excellent contributions in this debate, especially from such experienced and eloquent Members as the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) and my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Sir P. Emery). I hope that new Members who have been present will feel that this place is a worthwhile institution. We must all play our part in seeking to improve its procedures. Making haste slowly although determinedly—we should be determined to make the place better—should perhaps be our motto, rather than rushing into reforms that we later have cause to regret.

9.50 pm

Mr. Clive Soley (Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush): This Parliament has a wonderful window of opportunity radically to reform the House of Commons—something for which many of us have fought for, year after year. We start from the position that the House of Commons, throughout the centuries, has been the model for Parliaments around the world, yet, sadly and tragically, in the past 80 years or so we have reformed it too little and

[Mr. Clive Soley]

too late. Now we have another opportunity. What encourages me so much is not only the way in which my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House addresses this issue, but the contributions that we have heard from both sides of the House. Radically important contributions have been made.

Mr. Maxton: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Soley: If my hon. Friend will allow me, I shall not give way, because I have only 10 minutes and I want to make some important points. I think that he will support me, but if he feels desperately about anything I say, I shall let him intervene. Please give me time to make my points.

Mr. Maxton: I find it depressing.

Mr. Soley: Well, let me just say this. We all agree that there should be more evidence taking in the Committee system. The Special Standing Committee procedure was established in 1980, but it was used only seven times up till 1996. That is tragic. It has been mentioned a number of times, because the poll tax and the Child Support Agency would not have seen the light of day if those Committees had taken evidence from outside.

My hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes, South-West (Dr. Starkey) made a wonderful speech, befitting a scientist. It was full of light and reason, although I warn her that, from my experience, light and reason do not necessarily advance one's political career. Indeed, I sometimes think that a working definition of political activity is anything that defies reason and logic. What she said was very important. Like so many of us, she picked up the point that taking evidence first improves the legislation that comes out at the end.

I want to mention two committees that were held in the House but were outside the parliamentary structure: the press committee, which my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Mr. Kidney) chaired for me, and the committee on the family, which was held during the United Nations Year of the Family. Both of those committees took evidence from people outside. Although they had no formal existence in the House of Commons, over and over again they attracted coverage on the television and radio news and in the press. I had masses of letters from people saying, "Why can't Parliament do this more often?"

We must find a way for Back Benchers to set up such committees. They have a limited, finite life and can consider particular areas of policy. They can examine contentious areas that Government and Opposition parties are afraid to consider. My hon. Friend the Member for Newport, West (Mr. Flynn) knows exactly what I mean. We are reluctant to examine certain subjects, such as drugs and the royal family, because of our fear of the treatment that they are given in the tabloid press. We are even reluctant to deal with issues of the family. Would it not be nice if, at the same time as we considered the family, we took the advice that we give to people outside and introduced some family-friendly policies into House of Commons procedures?

There are many issues in which we can involve Back Benchers directly by means of the Committee structure. We have done that in the past; it is not as though it is a

new idea. I make no excuse for using again an example that I have used many times before, which is in *Hansard*. In 1833, there were riots in Clerkenwell. On 11 July 1833, the House of Commons ordered

"That a Select Committee be appointed to inquire into the Conduct of the Metropolitan Police on the 13th May last, in dispersing a Public Meeting in Cold Bath Fields".

One police officer had been killed. If we carried out a study like that, there would be headlines in the tabloid press about Members of Parliament attacking the police. The Committee reported in August of that year, after taking evidence outside. One of its recommendations was that the police should never act as agents provocateurs. All the recommendations were implemented.

When we had riots in 1981, Lord Scarman—for whom I have great admiration—spent some years on a procedure that involved taking evidence and reporting to the House. We still have not acted on many of those recommendations. It is nonsense that we were doing it better in 1833. We could be proud of our procedure then. Indeed, people around the world were copying it, saying, "What a good idea. Let us do the same." If that could be done in 1833, we could do it now.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon) said that we had lost something, and that is what we have lost. My hon. Friend the Member for Denton and Reddish (Mr. Bennett) hit the nail on the head: we need to give Back Benchers more power, more influence and more independence.

There is, however, a problem for both Government and Opposition. The Government's job is to get their legislation through. What we must do, within the culture of the House, is recognise that, as Back Benchers, we must allow Governments to get their legislation through; but Governments must allow Back Benchers much more say on the variation of legislation. That is why evidence taking is so important, as is the ability to participate in the Committee structure. I was attracted by some of the suggestions made by the hon. Member for Wantage (Mr. Jackson), who made an important contribution to the debate.

We must approach the media differently. The right hon. Member for East Devon (Sir P. Emery) spoke about a dedicated parliamentary television channel. I have no problem with that, but we need to do something much more important: we need to allow television and radio to be involved in our activities far more easily.

When I set up my two committees, one on the press and one on the family, there were only two or three Committee Rooms in which I could put television equipment. It is absurd that a Member of Parliament who wants to film a meeting cannot do so in the vast majority of Rooms in the House. Surely, if the hon. Members who are present want the meeting to be televised, it should be, but our funny rules and regulations make it very difficult for the media to report what we are doing effectively. Although we rightly complain at times about the way in which the media report us, we make it difficult for them. Let us open up the whole media debate, and be more realistic.

I also think that we should look again at the Representation of the People Act 1989. There is a good deal of evidence to show that the way in which it works is not allowing good coverage of elections, as we saw very dramatically at the last general election. That, however, is a wider issue, which I will not deal with now.

The facilities in the House are inadequate. New Members know that better than others, but we all knew it when we were first elected. I could speak about that at some length if I had time.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne was also right about time in the House, but if we are to give people time here—if we are to get people back in here—one of the things that we must do, as Members of Parliament, is stop acting so much like rather big councillors. That means devolving power to regional government. It would mean that we could start being Members of Parliament and might even look at the heretical matter of reducing the number of Members of Parliament. We need to do that, and if the number were reduced, hon. Members would get more than about four chances a year of catching the Speaker's eye in a major debate.

This splendid debate presents an enormous opportunity. I ask the House, I almost plead with it, to look at these proposed reforms, so that, 10, 20 or 50 years from now, we shall be able to look back and say, "Yes, I was part of the Parliament that reformed the British House of Commons and brought it back into the forefront of parliamentary democracy."

It being Ten o'clock, the motion for the Adjournment of the House lapsed, without Question put.

BSE

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—[Mr. Dowd.]

10 pm

Mr. Malcolm Bruce (Gordon): I am glad to have this opportunity of an early debate on the BSE crisis. I congratulate the Minister, who has already been in action responding to a debate, on his appointment. He represents an urban constituency, and may not recently have had to deal at first hand with agricultural issues on behalf of his constituents. However, he is fair-minded and intelligent, and the lack of farms in Perry Barr should in no way prevent him from being an effective Minister in the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food.

I am sure that the Minister does not need me to tell him that the dominating issue in his in-tray is the crisis in the beef industry arising from the continuing export ban. My constituency has almost certainly the biggest concentration of beef producer interests in the United Kingdom. Apart from specialist beef production on farms, there are three abattoirs, two cattle marts, a wide variety of meat processors, specialist transport companies and other ancillary trades. My newly elected hon. Friend the Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Sir R. Smith) has similar concerns for the industry in his constituency, which directly adjoins mine.

Some people have made money out of the crisis and from the substantial amounts of financial support that have been injected into managing the problem. The trouble is that others have suffered substantial losses, and many have received no compensation whatever. The Minister will appreciate that there is deep and widespread anxiety about the future. There is also anger in some quarters about the fact that people have been left to struggle on alone.

Beef finishers are currently losing money. They face prices that are at 1982 levels, and many are selling cattle for less than the price at which they bought them in. That is clearly unsustainable. If the situation continues for much longer, it will bode ill for the autumn cattle sales and the future of hill farmers, who depend on them for their very existence.

Against that background, it is hardly surprising that there is widespread anger at the scale of foreign imports from sources that do not have the UK's rigorous safety controls, which only last week were acknowledged by the European Commission as providing the highest standards anywhere.

The latest figures that I have obtained show that, for January and February, imports totalled 19,770 tonnes, which is 47 per cent. more than for the same period last year. The largest proportion of those imports came from the Irish Republic, but a great deal also came from non-EU countries, and especially south America. None of those countries applies the rigorous standards that are now required in British abattoirs.

Sir Robert Smith (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine): I thank my hon. Friend for associating the concerns in his constituency with those in mine. Several farmers came to my last surgery and raised the worry of the lack of a level playing field in the context of imported and domestic beef. At Prime Minister's Question Time,

[Sir Robert Smith]

my hon. Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr. Wallace), who is the leader of the Liberal Democrats in Scotland, raised that issue, but he did not get an answer. I hope that, at the end of this debate, we shall get a satisfactory reply.

Mr. Bruce: It is a matter which, as I am sure the Minister is already aware, causes a great deal of emotional heat.

I welcome the Government's announcement that they will close down abattoirs which do not meet the required standards. That is further evidence of their determination to eliminate any risk of contaminated meat entering the food chain.

At the same time as we have introduced high standards, the incidence of BSE in farms in the United Kingdom has fallen rapidly. Last year's total was slightly more than 20 per cent. of the total in the peak year of 1992. This year, the total has fallen sharply, to less than 5 per cent. of the worst year on an annualised rate. Particularly welcome to me is the fall in Scotland, which seems likely to have well below 100 cases this year, compared with the peak of 2,208 in 1993.

The fall in the incidence of BSE has taken place at a time of worrying signs that the number of cases occurring outside the United Kingdom may be on the increase. I note that the Minister told *Farmers Weekly* that, to insist that other EU member states applied British controls and banned imports that did not meet the same standards might be counter-productive. I understand that argument, but he must recognise that British producers cannot expect to be left in the maelstrom of collapsed prices and soaring imports without direct assistance or a timetable for the lifting of the export ban.

It is not tenable for the EU to talk of a single European market and a common agricultural policy when one large member state is effectively excluded from both. I know that that is uncomfortable to many who work at the European Commission, and we must help to secure the framework for lifting the ban, and help our beef producers to stay in business in the mean time.

In the 14 months since the ban was imposed, an enormous amount of time and momentum has been wasted or lost. I certainly do not blame the Minister for that. The selective cull, delayed six months, is still barely under way. We must complete it on terms compatible with the Florence agreement as quickly as possible. I know that the Minister agrees with that.

If the certified herd scheme is to go ahead, it must be on terms that are not prejudicial to Great Britain producers. If we had set in motion a computerised database at the start of the crisis, we would be well on the way to achieving the full traceability scheme that the industry wants. The only way to recover that waste of time seems to be to set a cut-off birth date, after which cattle will be eligible for export. I am pleased to note that the Government are considering that.

The measures that I have mentioned are essential to bring forward the earliest date on which the ban may be lifted, and make it possible to announce the dates soon. Nothing less than the lifting of the ban will restore full confidence by establishing a genuine open market; but meanwhile, a number of measures are necessary to

provide short-term support before too many producers are swept away, or forced to abandon beef, with consequences for other sectors. Falling grain prices show that farmers who have the option to switch from stock to arable may not necessarily improve their situation by so doing.

Farmers in my area tell me that the priority for any additional money should be promotion of the quality and safety of British beef in general, and of Scottish beef in particular. That should be reinforced by a "Buy British" campaign, starting with the Government. I find it astonishing that the Ministry of Defence continues to import South American beef when we have a surplus of premium quality beef at home. All other major beef users, including McDonald's and Burger King, must be encouraged to buy British beef, which goes through more rigorous safety controls than the imported beef that they prefer.

The Government should reinforce such a campaign by encouraging a labelling scheme to enable consumers to know the origin of the beef they are buying. Perhaps the Government should also consider a voucher scheme such as we have had before to promote beef consumption among lower income groups who currently cannot afford it.

The tendency of British beef farmers to producer heavier and fatter cattle disadvantages us on intervention buying. The 360 kg cut-off is unfair to Britain and Ireland and the restriction to class 3 disadvantages Scottish producers, who have a higher proportion of class 4L beef—about 50 per cent. of the total. We obtained a dispensation on that last year, and I ask the Minister to press for a repeat as a matter of urgency, because the peak sales time is now, and farms face the double whammy of depressed prices and exclusion from intervention.

It has also been suggested to me that the intervention policy should be more imaginative. Buying into intervention some of the cheaper cuts, not just the best, might help to reduce the retail price of the best cuts and so boost consumer demand. Let us not forget all those forequarters that we do not know what to do with.

A number of other measures should be considered. The second payment for the beef special premium scheme is scheduled too late. Could it not be paid at slaughter, or brought forward to perhaps 18 months? The previous Government initiated the cut in compensation payments for over-30-month-scheme cattle from 1 ecu to 0.9 ecu, but they did so when the price for a cast cow was between £800 and £1,000, and not the prevailing price of £400. Will the Government press for its restoration?

Farmers have suffered all those difficulties and the added problem of a rising pound. Ireland has sought compensation for the green pound effect with payments of £91 million and £26 million. Should not the British Government follow a similar route?

Of course, those are all palliatives to make up for the impact of the ban. The only way in which confidence will be restored is when the ban is lifted. That must be the Government's overriding priority.

I have talked almost entirely about farmers, but other sectors of the beef trade have been hard hit. Their plight should not continue to be overlooked by this Government as it was by the previous one.

Specialist producers have been devastated. The company Donald Russell in my constituency supplies literally the best beef that one can buy anywhere in the

world. That is not just my view, but it was its customers' view until the ban was imposed. It was almost entirely export-oriented, and its market disappeared overnight. That superb producer of quality meat is only ticking over now, on much reduced turnover and margins. That company and others deserve compensation for stock losses, and they should be given the opportunity to get back into the market.

Head deboners were closed down on Government orders, issued overnight by fax, after they had been required to make considerable investment in new equipment to meet Government safety standards. Surely they should be compensated at least for the investment that they had to make on Government instruction. That investment was mostly financed by borrowing that could never be serviced once those firms were closed down by the same Government.

Specialist transport contractors are still hurting. They were deprived of their principal activity of taking beef to continental Europe, and many suffered immediate losses. They and others were forced to sell expensive rigs at a loss, and were unable to diversify in an increasingly competitive market. Many drivers have been laid off, and some companies have gone bust.

The Federation of Small Businesses in Scotland has carried out a survey of hauliers in Scotland, which showed that there has been an average 42 per cent. drop in trade since the ban. The federation has pointed out that that drop ranges from 10 per cent. to 100 per cent. I do not need to tell the Minister that 100 per cent. means that someone ain't in business any more.

I have talked to a number of hauliers, not only in my constituency but elsewhere. They are so angry that they are considering organising land blockades of major roads to draw attention to their plight. I hope that the Minister will appreciate that I have urged them to give the Government a chance to listen, and I hope to respond to their plight before they take any precipitate action. I urge the Government to consider some avenue of compensation at least for the loss of their expensive specialist equipment.

I know that the Minister may say that I have offered a long list of the measures that could help. In my original draft speech, I mentioned that £1,000 million had already been spent on compensation. I see from the Minister's letter, which was circulated to Members today, that £1,500 million has already been spent on compensation and intervention. Billions more pounds have been committed. Given those figures, it is clear that some people have done extremely well. To me that proves that it is an ill wind that blows nobody any good.

I urge the Minister to consider a review of how the money is spent in future, so that he might be able to provide compensation to people who have had none—without any extra cost to the taxpayer—by reassessing the way it is calculated, so that it is fairer and based on an assessment of real need and actual loss. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will understand how angry people feel when they see their businesses disappearing under them, while other people make a fortune at the taxpayers' expense and through no particular merit of their own.

An early lifting of the ban is the overriding priority, and a firm date for that is essential. I understand the Government's determination to secure that end by engaging in constructive dialogue with our European

partners on the Commission. I assure the Minister that in that venture he will have full co-operation and support from these Benches. Indeed, we are well aware that many people on the Commission are as anxious as we are that the matter is resolved. What they have not had is any constructive initiative from the British Government over the past 14 months. A new Government and a new Minister have an opportunity to turn the matter around.

In the meantime, I hope that the Minister understands that at least some of the measures that I have outlined must be put in place soon, or there will be no significant beef industry left. The quality product that my constituency produces—and I do not exaggerate—may never return to the best plates on the best tables in the world.

10.16 pm

The Minister of State, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Jeff Rooker): I congratulate the hon. Member for Gordon (Mr. Bruce) on securing this debate. Within a few hours of my appointment and my walking into the Department, I told my advisers that, when the House reassembled, BSE would be a top priority. Given the Adjournment debate prospects both on Wednesday mornings and at other times during the week, I would have been astonished if there had not been a brief debate on BSE.

I also congratulate the hon. Gentleman on a measured speech. If I cannot respond now to all the points he made, I shall do my best to cover them in correspondence.

I thank him sincerely for his kind remarks about me. It is true that I do not have an agricultural background, and that my constituents are not exactly versed in the ways of agriculture. However, everyone is a consumer. One does not need to be an expert in agricultural technology and procedures to understand that there has been a massive crisis of confidence in British food, not just beef.

That has had catastrophic implications for job prospects for many people who would not usually be associated with enterprise, including lorry drivers and shopkeepers. Therefore, I make no apology—nor does my right hon. Friend the Minister—for Members of Parliament who represent urban constituencies taking a broader view. Their constituency interests are the same as those of everyone else—safer food for all our people, and a restoration of confidence in our food production system.

As the hon. Gentleman mentioned—it shows how efficient the system is—my right hon. Friend the Minister has today written to all right hon. and hon. Members telling them about our plans for BSE. It was important to do that, as we are about to start a short recess. I am pleased to have this opportunity to emphasise some of the points made by my right hon. Friend. I shall come in a minute to aspects of the ban mentioned by the hon. Member for Gordon.

The BSE inheritance is not a happy one. We inherited concerns about public health, a loss of confidence in beef, lingering animal health problems, a battered British beef industry, stores stacked high with cattle remains, a colossal bill for the taxpayer—which is rising daily—and antagonised, deeply suspicious, European partners. There are also a great many angry farmers. If I were a farmer, I would be angry, too.

We also inherited Administration failures. The previous Administration failed to enforce the rules properly, such as the offal controls in abattoirs to protect the public,

[Mr. Jeff Rooker]

and the controls on animal feed to eradicate BSE. They had a failed policy of non-co-operation in Europe. That did not bring any benefits to this country. They failed to deliver on their promise to get the beef ban lifted by last November.

The previous Government failed to get cracking with the selective cull. I was astonished at what I found when, within a day of coming to the Ministry, I asked about the figures on what had happened in the six weeks of the general election campaign, when there were still Ministers around who could have been asking questions and pressing ahead. The previous Government failed to reassure consumers. We have inherited a catalogue of failure, and much needs to be done.

I can assure the House that we shall do everything in our power to turn things around. We must have a safer food policy. We must make the point that our policing of the beef production system is second to none in Europe. We produce the finest and safest quality beef anywhere in Europe. That point must be repeated to our partners.

We also have to regain the trust of customers—a key way in which we shall do so is to set up a food standards agency. There has to be an independent element to help to restore confidence. We are consulting on that, and we hope to produce a draft Bill this Session for introduction in the next Session. Meanwhile, there is much that we can do to turn matters around.

We shall rebuild bridges across Europe—that process has already been begun by my right hon. Friends in the Cabinet, including my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister. We shall seek to restore hope to a battered industry. We shall work tirelessly to get the export ban lifted, although that will not be done overnight. Our action will consist not of one single measure, but of a range of measures. We shall continue to give more impetus to the selective cull. We shall move rapidly to create a computerised cattle tracking system.

Those are the Government's challenges and priorities. They will be my personal priorities, as well as those of my right hon. and hon. Friends in the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food—and for which we shall account to the House.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): I entirely endorse everything that my hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Mr. Bruce) said, and I echo his congratulations to the Minister on his appointment. We have high hopes for tackling this difficult problem with a fresh brain and a fresh start. In underlining what my hon. Friend said, may I ask the Minister to address the following point about imports? It is not just unfair to British producers to have imports of lower standards into this country: it is unfair to the British consumer, who is being given many products that are not up to the standards on which the Government and the European Commission insist.

Mr. Rooker: That is clearly the case, and there will be an appropriate moment to reinforce that point.

The incidence of BSE is in strong decline in the United Kingdom today. That is largely attributable to the measures taken in 1988 to ban the feeding of cattle remains back to cattle. But since that time, there have been more than 30,000 cases of BSE in cattle born after

that ban, which proves that it was not properly enforced, and that there was a lack of action on the part of the previous Government.

Controls have been progressively tightened since then. We now have a complete ban on the use of meat and bone meal in any farm animal feed or fertiliser. We shall ensure that existing controls continue to be properly and rigorously enforced.

Scientists predict that BSE will fall to a low level by the year 2001. We intend to ensure that action is taken to eradicate BSE in the United Kingdom as quickly as possible. Meanwhile, we shall apply a high level of precaution in line with the scientific advice available—we shall operate a safety first policy. That is the only way to encourage the return of confidence.

The Government's priority is to ensure the highest standards of food safety. Having received Professor James's report, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister announced on 8 May—one week after coming to office—the Government's plans to set up a food standards agency. Until then, the handling of food safety matters will remain with the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, which will work in close contact with the Department of Health and the other agricultural Departments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

The handling of food safety matters will be on a new and much more open footing. Our watchwords will be openness and accountability to the House and people outside. There will be no secret reports and no secret meetings; we shall disclose everything that comes our way from the scientists and, within the bounds of commercial confidentiality, we shall be as open as we can when answering parliamentary questions.

We shall base our actions on the best scientific advice. We shall continue to look to the independent scientific advisory committee, the Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee—SEAC—for that advice. The committee meets regularly; it keeps the evidence on BSE and the new variant of CJD under constant review, as well as checking that controls are in place to protect public health. We will act promptly on SEAC recommendations, as and when they come to us—there will be no delay.

I turn now to the export ban on beef and beef products. We intend to press, and are pressing, for the earliest possible lifting of the ban. My right hon. Friend the Minister has spent two days in Europe and Brussels this week meeting not only Commissioners but members of the European Parliament—something our predecessors in office flatly refused to do, thus creating enormous ill will against our country, and undermining the efforts of our industry and the people who work in it to rebuild confidence. We intend to press for the earliest possible lifting of the ban, but it will not be easy, given the position that we have inherited.

The Government do not want to raise false hopes. Since taking office, we have discovered that it was never credible to pretend that the ban could be lifted by November 1996, as the former Prime Minister told the House. When serving as shadow deputy Leader of the House, I was present during nearly all the statements that were made on this subject, and having asked the questions and received answers and advice from inside the Department that we could not necessarily have got while in Opposition, that is what we have discovered.

We intend to respect the Florence agreement—we have no choice about that. We will work constructively with the Commission and other member states on how best to make progress under that agreement. My right hon. Friend the Minister has already initiated action with Commissioners Fischler and Bonino on that matter.

The Florence agreement set out five preconditions for the UK to meet before the ban can be lifted. Action is in hand on all five, and it is being checked on and chased up daily—sometimes hourly. However, delays have occurred with the selective cull, so we are making it a priority to speed up its operation. We have invited the Commissioners to send further missions here if any other issues are causing them concern.

We are also keen to pursue the steps set down in Florence for the progressive lifting of the ban. The Commission knows that we want to press ahead with the export-certified herd scheme, which our predecessors tabled. Mrs. Bonino has been very helpful in arranging for that proposal to be examined by the appropriate European Union scientific committees. Their scrutiny should be completed next month, and we look forward with interest to the outcome.

The Florence agreement also provides a basis for us to table further proposals, and I can assure hon. Members that we are giving active thought to the best way of doing so. Our aim is to maximise the possibilities of an early resumption of exports, to the ultimate benefit of all parts of the United Kingdom. We are the Government of the United Kingdom, and are working to serve all parts of the United Kingdom. We shall therefore table further proposals when we judge it would be fruitful and in the interests of the United Kingdom to do so.

In the meantime, we shall continue to pursue the challenge to the legality of the ban through the European Court of Justice. There is no sense in not pursuing that case, because we do not concede the legality of the ban. I understand that a hearing date has been set for 2 July. In addition, we shall adopt a much more positive and open approach to the European Parliament's temporary committee of inquiry. The committee was, of course, highly critical of the previous Government.

British beef will be exported only when consumers throughout Europe are convinced that it is not only of the highest quality, but as safe as beef from anywhere else in the European Union. We would submit that, because of all the checks and controls that we have implemented, it is safer than beef from anywhere else in the European Union; but, because of the scares based on false premises, we have to reassure our European partners, their consumers and their constituents that that is true.

The Florence agreement, which was heralded with much acclaim last year, provides a framework, but no more. It will clearly require a good deal of hard work to win back the trade. We have made a start on the process, but much remains to be done if we are to repair the damage. We will need to carry the whole House with us on this issue. Real progress depends on restoring confidence in British beef, and that will come about only by allowing measured consideration by experts, not by trying to bludgeon our beef back on to European dinner tables.

Starting a trade war will not help. I understand hon. Members' feelings, and I have received urgent representations about beef imports from producers, supermarkets, burger chains and so on. The position beggars belief, and our farmers and beef producers do not understand how it came into being. However, given the sensitivity of the problem—which, because of the imprecision of the Florence agreement and the position bequeathed by the former Prime Minister, has as much to do with politics as with science—we have no choice but to work within the framework. I hope that we will be able to bring good news to the House soon.

Mr. Bruce: Will the Minister undertake to review the way in which compensation is paid, so as to ensure that those who have got nothing might at least be considered?

Mr. Rooker: We are reviewing all policy and all actions related to the situation we have inherited. We are giving the House information on figures and our policy objectives within the inherited framework, so that we can carry the whole House with us.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at half-past Ten o'clock.

Written Answers to Questions

Thursday 15 May 1997

HOME DEPARTMENT

Prison Service (Parliamentary Questions)

Mr. Patrick Hall: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on his proposals to reply to parliamentary questions about Her Majesty's Prison Service. [118]

Mr. Straw: Our Manifesto commits us to take proper Ministerial responsibility for the Prison Service. As an early step, I propose that in future all Questions about the Prison Service for England and Wales should be answered by a Home Office Minister, and not by the Director General or other senior Prison Service officials.

This change will put right what many in Parliament have long regarded as a bad practice. I regard it as essential that Ministers should answer personally to Parliament for what is done in our prisons and not leave it to their civil servants.

This is no reflection on the Director General, Mr. Richard Tilt, who has my full support. It has no implications for the Prison Service's status as an executive agency of the Home Office or for other agencies, including the Scottish and Northern Ireland Prison Services which are the responsibility of my right hon. Friends the Secretaries of State for Scotland and Northern Ireland respectively.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Overseas Development Administration

Mr. Dennis Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on the departmental minute that the Overseas Development Administration laid before the House on 3 April 1997. [134]

Clare Short: The Departmental Minute reported that the Department had entered into a contingent liability arising from a tax indemnity given to the commercial banks which are financing the Jiangyin Suspension Bridge Project in China. The estimated maximum liability is US\$9,740,290 (approximately £6,087,680).

The Minute was placed in the Libraries of both Houses and copies were sent, under cover of explanatory letters, to the Chairman of the Public Accounts and Foreign Affairs Committees.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Argentina (Arms Sales)

Mr. Dennis Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what exceptions Her Majesty's Government have permitted to the embargo on the sale of arms to Argentina for the supply of equipment to Argentine UN peacekeeping forces. [567]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: The Government have agreed exceptionally to allow the limited supply of nine anti-riot vehicles for use by the Argentine contingent of the UN Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus. The Argentine Army have given assurances that the vehicles will not be used for other purposes. This is an exception to, but not a change of, policy on the supply of military-related equipment to Argentina.

Written Answers to Questions

Friday 16 May 1997

HOME DEPARTMENT

Asylum Seekers (Zaire)

Mr. Olnier: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will now declare Zaire to be a country in which there has been a fundamental change of circumstances under the Social Security (Persons from Abroad) Miscellaneous Amendments Regulations 1996. [628]

Mr. Straw: In view of the current situation in Zaire, I have decided to declare that that country has undergone such a fundamental change in circumstances that I would not normally order the return of a person to that country for the time being. The effect is that a Zairean national who applies for asylum other than on arrival, within three months of this declaration being made, becomes eligible to claim social security benefits while their application is considered by my Department.

PRIME MINISTER

Interception Commissioner

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Prime Minister what arrangements have been made to appoint a Commissioner under the Interception of Communications Act 1985 as a successor to Lord Nolan whose appointment expired on 11 April. [590]

The Prime Minister: I am pleased to announce that Lord Nolan has accepted an invitation to serve as Interception Commissioner for a further three years.

TREASURY

Economic and Finance Council

Mr. Timms: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the recent Council meeting of the Economic and Finance Ministers of the European Union. [620]

Mr. Gordon Brown: I represented the UK at the Economic and Finance Council—ECOFIN—of the European Union in Brussels on 12 May.

In the margins of the meeting, I spoke with Commissioner Monti, who confirmed that the Commission would not oppose a cut in the rate of VAT on domestic fuel in the UK to 5 per cent.

The Commission presented to the Council its Single Market Action Plan, which was broadly welcomed. Certain aspects of it were most welcome, in particular the emphasis on implementation and enforcement of legislation, action to combat unfair state aids and steps to complete the single market in financial services. The Action Plan will be considered further by the Internal Market Council on 20 May, then in final form by the Amsterdam European Council.

The Council carried out an examination of the convergence programmes of Portugal and Spain for the period 1997–2000. It welcomed Portugal's strategy of pursuing budgetary consolidation while ensuring price and exchange rate stability, and providing the conditions for economic growth and employment. The Spanish programme's commitment to promoting growth and employment through budgetary consolidation and structural reform, especially of labour markets, was also welcomed.

The Commission presented its proposals for the 1998 budget. The Council welcomed the Commission's commitment to limiting the growth in expenditure. The Preliminary Draft Budget will be considered by the Budget Council on 24 July.

The Council agreed to abrogate the excess deficit decisions relating to the Netherlands and Finland, and approved recommendations to all other Member States with an excessive deficit except the UK. The recommendation to the UK will be considered after my forthcoming Budget.

Arrangements for the consideration of the Commission's proposals for a directive on taxation of energy products were discussed. There was no discussion of the substance of the proposals.

In response to the Commission's presentation of its Action Plan for the reform of the customs transit system in Europe, the Council stressed the priority it attached to measures to tackle fraud.

The Presidency presented a report on the progress of discussions of proposals to extend the scope of the parent and subsidiaries directive, relating to the elimination of double taxation on profit distributions between companies in different Member States. Further discussions will be necessary to consider outstanding difficulties.

The Commission presented its proposed FISCALIS programme for reinforcement of indirect taxation systems. It was hoped that the proposal could be adopted before the end of this year.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Kingskerswell Bypass

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what financial provision has been made for the Kingskerswell bypass (Torbay Expressway); and if he will make a statement. [60]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Kingskerswell Bypass scheme was removed from the Highways Agency long-term programme in December 1996. I understand

that Devon County Council are investigating the scope to progress this scheme as a Public Private Partnership. No financial provision has been made for the scheme at this time.

Local Government Reorganisation

Ms Jacqui Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what resources he has made available under the 1997-98 Local Government Reorganisation Costs Scheme for the shadow authorities elected in local elections on 1 May; and if he will make a statement.

[695]

Ms Armstrong: In their shadow year, authorities have no source of funding other than the resources made available to them through the Local Government Reorganisation Costs Scheme. Under the scheme for 1997-98 I have decided to allocate an initial amount of £1,000,000 to each of the 4 shadow authorities recently elected for: Hertfordshire, Worcestershire, Malvern Hills and Medway Towns. Each shadow authority will be invited to submit a formal bid for costs at the mid year stage of the scheme in the autumn and I expect to make further awards at that stage.

Written Answers to Questions

Monday 19 May 1997

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Security Services

Mr. Winnick: To ask the President of the Council if she intends to propose the setting up of a Select Committee to oversee the security services. [78]

Mrs. Ann Taylor: There is already an Intelligence and Security Committee established under the Intelligence Services Act 1994 to examine the expenditure, administration and policy of the Secret Intelligence Service, Security Service and GCHQ. It reports annually to my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister who is required to lay a copy of the Committee's annual report before each House of Parliament. My right hon. Friend is in the process of considering the appointment of hon. Members to that Committee within the terms of the Act and will make an announcement in due course.

Wigs and Gowns

Mr. Winnick: To ask the President of the Council if she will consult as to whether it is appropriate for wigs and gowns to be worn in the Chamber by senior officers of the House. [83]

Mrs. Ann Taylor: This is a matter which could be considered by the new Committee on the modernisation of the House, which I hope will be established soon.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Visitors' Visas

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he expects to reinstate the right of appeal against the refusal of a visitor's visa. [283]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Our manifesto commits us to providing a streamlined system of appeals for visitors denied a visa. We are examining the options for doing this.

Life Sentence Tariffs

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of the implications of the judicial review of Kavanagh and Quigley *ex parte* Secretary of State for life sentence tariffs; and if he will make a statement. [152]

Ms Joyce Quin: We are considering the judgment.

Full Sutton Prison

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of the report of Council of Europe Committee on the Prevention of Torture on its visit to the special secure unit at HMP Full Sutton; and if he will make a statement. [156]

Ms Joyce Quin: A delegation from the Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe visited Frankland, Full Sutton and Belmarsh prisons on 12 and 13 May 1997. The Prison Service will consider and respond to any report prepared by the committee.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what progress has been made in considering the request of Danny McNamee currently detained in the Special Secure Unit at HMP Full Sutton for a temporary transfer to Northern Ireland. [160]

Ms Joyce Quin: Mr. McNamee's request for transfer to Northern Ireland is currently under consideration. A decision will be made as soon as possible.

Prisoners (Temporary Extended Transfer)

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many prisoners are currently held on temporary extended transfer to Northern Ireland; and if he will consider making those transfers permanent. [151]

Ms Joyce Quin: Nineteen prisoners are currently transferred on a temporary basis from England and Wales to Northern Ireland. It is open to any of the prisoners concerned to request a permanent transfer. Any such request will be considered on its individual merits in accordance with the criteria announced to Parliament on 23 November 1992.

Special Secure Units

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a personal inspection of the condition of prisoners currently detained in special secure units. [157]

Mr. Straw: I intend to visit a number of prisons in the near future and will inspect a special secure unit as part of this programme.

Asylum Seeker (Algeria)

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the circumstances in which a citizen of Algeria was refused asylum in this country and is now reported to have been murdered. [80]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The Foreign and Commonwealth Office has investigated the claim made on 9 May by the Refugee Council that an asylum seeker whose application was turned down had been killed on his return to Algeria. The Government have received categorical assurances from the Government of Algeria that the individual is alive and well, and our ambassador met the former asylum seeker on Sunday 18 May. We are therefore satisfied that the claims made are unfounded. Removals of failed asylum seekers to Algeria will now resume where appropriate.

Derek Lewis

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will place in the Library all the papers and other documents relating to the dismissal of Derek Lewis; and if he will make a statement. [81]

Mr. Straw: It is not possible for me to meet my hon. Friend's request. I am not responsible to Parliament for events which took place under the last Administration; nor do I have access to their papers.

Racist Attacks

Ms Abbott: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will meet Mrs. Doreen Lawrence to discuss racist attacks. [393]

Mr. Straw: Yes. I would be happy to meet Mrs. Lawrence. My office will be in touch with my hon. Friend to make the arrangements.

St. Helena

Dr. Marek: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will restore residence rights in the United Kingdom for citizens of St. Helena. [139]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: We have no present plans to do so.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

ENVIRONMENT AND THE REGIONS

Housing Grants, Construction and Regeneration Act

Mr. Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he plans to publish the regulations and guidance in relation to part IV of the Housing Grants, Construction and Regeneration Act 1996; what will be the implementation date; what (i) draft guidance and (ii) further consultation he proposes before taking such action; and if he will make a statement. [707]

Mr. Raynsford: We expect to consult local authorities on the draft regulations and guidance on relocation grants in June. The guidance will then need to be laid in draft before both Houses of Parliament for 40 days, excluding periods when Parliament is prorogued or adjourned. We therefore expect to implement the provisions in the autumn.

TRANSPORT

Rail Tickets

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what proposals he has to ensure that passengers receive impartial advice when purchasing rail tickets. [54]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Train operators have a legal obligation to sell tickets impartially and to provide accurate information about ticketing and fares options. Serious and persistent contravention of their impartiality obligations will trigger formal action by the independent Rail Regulator.

The Deputy Prime Minister, the Minister of Transport and I will be meeting the Rail Regulator shortly to discuss how we might achieve more effective regulation of the railway industry. We have already commissioned a report on the shortcomings of the sanctions currently available to the regulatory authorities.

Rail Regulator

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what proposals he has to increase the powers of the Rail Regulator. [55]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Government have clearly stated that they intend to establish more effective and accountable regulation by the Rail Regulator. We are currently considering the options.

South West Trains

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the total amount paid in subsidy to South West Trains by week for each of the last six months. [31]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Office of Passenger Rail Franchising makes four-weekly support payments to all franchise operators on the basis of the rail industry periods. The four-weekly amounts paid to South West Trains covering the last six months—13 October 1996 to 26 April 1997—are as follows:

	£
1996-97 Period 8	5,076,824.01
1996-97 Period 9	4,520,756.84
1996-97 Period 10	4,655,886.81
1996-97 Period 11	4,708,747.86
1996-97 Period 12	4,887,630.58
1997-97 Period 13	4,632,509.64
1997-98 Period 1	4,351,435.10

Aviation Policy

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what proposals he has to publish a White Paper on UK aviation policy. [53]

Ms Glenda Jackson: My right hon. Friend has no plans to publish an early White Paper on aviation.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Teachers (Early Retirement)

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what was (a) the total number and (b) the number in each local education authority of (i) head teachers, (ii) deputy head teachers and (iii) teachers who took early retirement on the grounds of ill-health in 1995-96; and if he will make a statement. [165]

Mr. Byers: Teachers in service in the maintained nursery, primary, secondary and special education sector in England at 31 March 1995 who were awarded ill-health retirement in the financial year 1995-96 are as follows:

Ill-health retirements in financial year 1995-96

	<i>Heads</i>	<i>Deputies</i>	<i>Classroom teachers</i>
Corporation of London	0	0	0
Camden	0	*	19
Greenwich	*	0	16
Hackney	*	*	9
Hammersmith and Fulham	*	0	17
Islington	*	*	5
Kensington and Chelsea	*	0	9
Lambeth	0	0	17
Lewisham	*	0	9
Southwark	*	0	13
Tower Hamlets	0	0	11
Wandsworth	0	*	11
Westminster	*	*	8
Barking and Dagenham	*	*	8
Barnet	*	0	18
Bexley	*	*	9
Brent	0	*	10
Bromley	7	0	12
Croydon	*	0	17
Ealing	0	*	11
Enfield	*	0	16
Haringey	6	*	7
Harrow	0	*	13
Havering	*	*	18
Hillingdon	0	*	9
Hounslow	*	*	19
Kingston upon Thames	*	*	13
Merton	*	*	*
Newham	0	0	11
Redbridge	*	0	7
Richmond upon Thames	*	0	8
Sutton	0	*	13
Waltham Forest	*	*	19
Birmingham	6	9	94
Coventry	0	*	26
Dudley	*	*	23
Sandwell	5	*	22
Solihull	0	*	12
Walsall	*	*	29
Wolverhampton	0	*	19
Knowsley	*	0	15
Liverpool	*	*	42
St. Helens	*	*	13
Sefton	*	*	25
Wirral	*	*	26
Bolton	*	*	20
Bury	*	*	17
Manchester	*	*	36
Oldham	*	*	18
Rochdale	5	*	28
Salford	0	*	21
Stockport	*	*	32
Tameside	*	*	22
Trafford	*	*	23
Wigan	*	5	23
Barnsley	0	5	16
Doncaster	*	*	25
Rotherham	*	*	14
Sheffield	6	*	32
Bradford	7	5	39
Calderdale	*	*	20
Kirklees	*	*	39
Leeds	*	6	72
Wakefield	5	*	42
Gateshead	*	*	26
Newcastle upon Tyne	0	0	18

Ill-health retirements in financial year 1995-96

	<i>Heads</i>	<i>Deputies</i>	<i>Classroom teachers</i>
North Tyneside	*	*	9
South Tyneside	*	*	15
Sunderland	*	*	33
Isles of Scilly	0	0	0
Avon	12	8	57
Bedfordshire	*	5	34
Berkshire	*	*	55
Buckinghamshire	5	*	44
Cambridgeshire	*	5	37
Cheshire	12	7	74
Cleveland	5	11	76
Cornwall	12	7	35
Cumbria	5	9	34
Derbyshire	14	9	47
Devon	17	9	78
Dorset	6	0	50
Durham	6	11	85
East Sussex	8	5	37
Essex	9	14	110
Gloucestershire	5	*	32
Hampshire	11	12	129
Hereford and Worcester	12	8	59
Hertfordshire	*	*	75
Humberside	6	13	86
Isle of Wight	*	0	16
Kent	26	11	131
Lancashire	24	20	175
Leicestershire	6	5	73
Lincolnshire	9	*	41
Norfolk	16	11	58
North Yorkshire	7	5	39
Northamptonshire	6	5	68
Northumberland	5	*	26
Nottinghamshire	13	9	78
Oxfordshire	*	*	47
Shropshire	8	*	28
Somerset	15	6	49
Staffordshire	8	11	115
Suffolk	8	*	52
Surrey	7	5	50
Warwickshire	5	*	38
West Sussex	8	*	26
Wiltshire	5	*	38
England	483	381	3,753

In order to avoid sensitive information about individuals being identified, numbers less than five are shown as asterisks.

Mount St. Mary School, Exeter

Mrs. Browning: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when he will announce a decision on the application by Mount St. Mary school, Exeter, for grant-maintained status. [88]

Mr. Byers: My right hon. Friend expects to make a decision on the proposals to establish a new grant-maintained school at Mount St. Mary's shortly.

Assisted Places Scheme

Mr. Tipping: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many places, at what schools and at what cost were provided under the assisted places scheme in Nottinghamshire in 1995-96 and 1996-97. [128]

Mr. Byers: The number of assisted places taken up and the cost of those places for each participating school in Nottinghamshire in academic years 1995-96 and 1996-97 is given in the table:

<i>Assisted places scheme: Nottinghamshire</i>		
<i>School name</i>	<i>Academic year</i> 1995-96	1996-97
<i>Nottingham high school</i>		
Number of assisted pupils	174	184
Cost of places £000s	498	553
<i>Nottingham high school for girls (GPDST)</i>		
Number of assisted pupils	197	220
Cost of places £000s	529	556
<i>Workshop college</i>		
Number of assisted pupils	27	29
Cost of places £000s	131	146

WALES

Welsh Devolution

Mr. Denzil Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales when he intends to publish a White Paper regarding the Government's proposals on Welsh devolution. [73]

Mr. Ron Davies: We expect to publish the White Paper on a Welsh Assembly as soon as possible after the Referendums (Scotland and Wales) Bill has received Royal Assent.

Arable Area Payments Scheme

Mr Tipping: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many payments were made and what was the total amount paid under the arable area payments scheme in 1996-97. [125]

Mr. Win Griffiths: During 1996-97 the Welsh Office dealt with 2,486 claims and the total amount paid is estimated at £11,856,000.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

GCHQ

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he plans to lift the ban on trade unions at GCHQ. [77]

Mr. Robin Cook: Yes; I issued the following press statement on 15 May which was placed in the Libraries of the House.

The Government have signalled their commitment to open and fair relations in the work place. As part of that commitment, I want today to right a long-standing wrong. Since 1984, we have been pledged to restore normal trade union rights to the staff of GCHQ. We are now honouring that pledge. I can announce that the conditions of service of staff at GCHQ have today been changed: they once again have the freedom they previously enjoyed to join any trade union they choose. Talks with the unions will begin as soon as possible to settle future arrangements for staff representation and to secure a collective agreement

on no disruption to the work of GCHQ which will ensure that GCHQ's operations are protected from any threat of industrial action.

Once they are complete, and once I am confident that the national security interest will continue to be properly protected, I will revoke the certificate that contains the remaining restrictions on access to industrial tribunals. This ensures that the existing protection arrangements will remain in place until we have a satisfactory alternative. Those former employees who were dismissed for continuing union membership and are below normal retirement age are free to apply for re-employment under the new conditions of service: each case will be treated sympathetically, within the normal civil service rules for such employment. GCHQ staff make a valuable contribution to protecting the liberties and freedoms of our country. Today's move enables them to share fully in one of the important liberties that they defend.

Gibraltar

Dr. Marek: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what is his Department's policy towards Gibraltar's territorial waters; and if he will make a statement. [140]

Mr. Doug Henderson: The territorial sea adjacent to the coast of Gibraltar is under British sovereignty. The territorial sea extends for three nautical miles from the coast, except where it abuts Spanish territorial waters, in which case the boundary follows a median line.

Dr. Marek: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make it his policy to terminate the Brussels process with the Spanish Government. [141]

Mr. Henderson: Dialogue with Spain on Gibraltar is important. I will be working to encourage a more productive exchange, including, as necessary, through the Brussels process.

Roisin McAliskey

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has received from (a) the Government of the Irish Republic and (b) others about the continuing detention at HMP Holloway of Ms Roisin McAliskey; and if he will make a statement. [154]

Mr Robin Cook: I have received no formal representation about Ms McAliskey, but I am aware that we have received a number of representations from Irish Members of Parliament, US Congressmen and other individuals.

HEALTH

Elderly Citizens (Rehabilitation)

Dr. Marek: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what representations he has received regarding the rehabilitation of elderly citizens; and if he will make a statement. [142]

Mr. Boateng: We have received some representations from medical and social care professionals and members of the public concerning the provision of national health service rehabilitation services, and expect to receive more in the near future.

Effective recovery and rehabilitation of patients is particularly important for older people, who may need a longer period to recover, especially after a spell in hospital. It is increasingly recognised that access to hospital and community-based rehabilitation and recovery services for patients who need them in one way to ensure older people retain optimal independence and to avoid unnecessary admissions into long-term care.

This Government are committed to the provision of an NHS recuperation service which will combine nursing and rehabilitation therapy services to those patients who have been assessed by a medical professional or multi-disciplinary team as being able to benefit from a rehabilitative programme of care.

PRIME MINISTER

Prime Minister's Questions

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Prime Minister what consultations he undertook with Opposition parties before proposing the abolition of Prime Minister's Questions on Tuesdays and Thursdays. [304]

Mr. Hogg: To ask the Prime Minister what discussions were held with representatives of the Opposition parties and with the House authorities before the announcement of the decision to change the arrangements for Prime Minister's Questions. [123]

The Prime Minister: I discussed the Government's intention to change the timing of Prime Minister's Questions with the Leader of the Opposition and the Leader of the Liberal Democrats shortly before the change was made public. The change is the first step to meeting our clear manifesto commitment to make Prime Minister's Questions more effective.

EU Negotiations

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Prime Minister what action he proposes in respect of (a) fishermen, (b) beef farmers and (c) taxpayers in his first month of negotiations in Brussels. [301]

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friends, the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and the Chancellor of the Exchequer have already visited Brussels to pursue the United Kingdom's interests. We are working within the intergovernmental conference negotiations for a solution to the problem of quota hopping; pursuing a progressive relaxation of the ban on exports of British beef; and seeking to ensure that the money British taxpayers contribute to the Community budget is used efficiently and effectively towards goals which the British people support. In the IGC we have already announced our intention to table new proposals to tackle fraud against the Community budget.

Asbestos

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Prime Minister if he will ban (a) import and (b) use of asbestos; and if he will make a statement. [51]

The Prime Minister: The Government are determined to deal effectively with the problems of asbestos, in line with advice from the Health and Safety Commission. Negotiations are being renewed at EU level which are likely to lead to further widespread prohibitions on the supply of asbestos. My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister will be advised by the Health and Safety Commission on developments and on the balance to be struck between EU and domestic arrangements.

Freedom of Information

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Prime Minister what plans he has to introduce freedom of information legislation. [84]

The Prime Minister: As announced in the Gracious Speech, we shall shortly be setting out in a White Paper our proposals for a freedom of information Bill.

Security Services

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Prime Minister what arrangements he intends to make for parliamentary scrutiny of the security services; and if he will make a statement. [79]

The Prime Minister: Under the terms of the Intelligence Services Act 1994, an Intelligence and Security Committee of nine Members from the House of Commons and the House of Lords is established to examine the expenditure, administration and policy of the Secret Intelligence Service, Security Service and GCHQ. It reports to me and I am required to lay a copy of the Committee's annual report before each House of Parliament. Following consultation with the Leader of the Opposition I will be appointing members to the Committee.

DEFENCE

Eurofighter Missile

Mr. McNulty: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he will announce the outcome of the competition for a weapon to meet the RAF's requirement for a beyond visual range air-to-air missile for Eurofighter. [709]

Mr. Spellar: After careful consideration of the responses we have received to the invitation to tender for missiles to meet Staff Requirement (Air) 1239 for a beyond visual range missile for Eurofighter, we have concluded that there is a need for further work to reduce risk in performance and time scale before we let a development and production contract. We therefore intend, subject to satisfactory negotiations, to place contracts with Matra British Aerospace (UK) Ltd. and Hughes (UK) Ltd. for project definition and risk reduction work on their respective solutions to the staff requirement. We expect to let these contracts in July and their duration will be about 12 months. We plan to make a contribution of £5 million to the costs of each contractor for this phase of the project.

Our intention is to ensure that Eurofighter enters operational service with the most cost effective equipment available.

Defence Review

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if the future of the Defence Test and Evaluation Organisation and the continuing use of Boscombe Down airfield will be included in his proposed defence review. [75]

Mr. John Reid: Our country's security needs and foreign policy objectives must be fully reflected in the roles, missions and tasks of our armed forces. The Government have decided therefore to hold a strategic defence and security review. All aspects of defence will be considered in this process.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Arable Area Payments

Mr Tipping: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many payments were made and what was the total amount paid under the arable area payments scheme in 1996-97. [127]

Mr. Rooker: During 1996-97, the Ministry dealt with 46,844 claims under the arable area payments scheme and the total amount paid is estimated at £1,101 million.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Legal Aid

32. **Mr. Fabricant:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will make it his policy to require a universal £20 application fee for legal aid. [398]

Mr. Hoon: The idea of universal contribution for legal aid came from the hon. Member's party. We propose to take forward our manifesto commitment to review civil justice and legal aid. In any event, the guiding principle in relation to such matters will be access to justice.

34. **Mr. Yeo:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what proposals he has to ensure that legal aid is available only to those in genuine need. [400]

Mr. Hoon: We shall be carrying forward our manifesto commitment to a review of civil justice and legal aid, but we shall in any event seek to ensure that legal aid is appropriately targeted.

35. **Mr. Burns:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what plans Her Majesty's Government have to expand eligibility for legal aid. [401]

Mr. Hoon: There are no plans at present to expand eligibility for legal aid.

Magistrates

33. **Mr. Skinner:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what steps he is taking to alter the current political balance among magistrates. [399]

Mr. Hoon: While politics play no part in the work of the bench, the Lord Chancellor considers that there should not be an undue number of supporters of any political party on any bench. He requires his Advisory Committees on Justices of the Peace to strive to ensure that those recommended for appointment are drawn from a broad cross section of the community, taking into account, amongst other matters, their political affiliations and the voting figures for the area. Anyone may apply to become a magistrate. I would, of course, welcome any assistance that hon. Members can give in encouraging those they regard as personally suitable to apply for appointment.

Limitation Legislation

36. **Mr. Hinchliffe:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department when he expects the review of limitation legislation to be completed. [402]

Mr. Hoon: The Law Commission is undertaking a comprehensive review of the law of limitation and expects to publish a consultation paper on the subject later this year. A period of consultation will follow before the Law Commission begins work on the final report.

Rural Magistrates Courts

37. **Mr. Spring:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what assessment he has made of the importance of retaining small, rural magistrates courts. [403]

Mr. Hoon: Magistrates courts are provided by the local paying authority for the use of the magistrates courts committee. Closure decisions are for the MCC to determine, although the paying authority may appeal to my right hon. and learned Friend the Lord Chancellor against a proposed closure. Each case will be dealt with on its merits.

Immigration Appeals

38. **Mr. Gerrard:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what steps he will take to deal with the backlog of appeals to the Immigration Appeals Tribunal. [404]

Mr. Hoon: The immigration appellate authorities have been resourced to deal with over 9,000 more cases this financial year than last. More adjudicators will be recruited over the summer, and our plans to reform the primary purpose rule should have a significant effect on the backlog.

Bail

Mr. Gapes: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will make a statement on advice given to judges about bail for those accused of murder. [390]

Mr. Hoon: No advice has been given. The granting of bail is subject to legislation, principally the Bail Act 1976.

NATIONAL HERITAGE

Tourism Industry

13. Mr. Amess: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what meetings he has had with representatives of the tourism industry about the social chapter and the minimum wage. [373]

Mr. Tom Clarke: Tourism, with its potential to generate employment, is one of the priorities we have set for the Department. We shall of course be taking every opportunity to meet representatives of the tourism industry to discuss a range of issues which affect it. The evidence is that most employers and employees in the tourism industry support a minimum wage. Minimum wages and basic standards of employment, by creating a better rewarded and motivated work force, can help to improve business of performance.

17. Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what assessment he has made of the impact on the tourism industry of a national minimum wage. [377]

Mr. Clarke: Tourism, with its potential to generate employment, is one of the priorities we have set for the Department. The UK tourism industry must compete on the quality of its product and service. The introduction of a national minimum wage, by helping to create a better rewarded and better motivated work force, will drive up standards and increase business.

26. Mr. David Atkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what proposals he has to promote the British tourism industry. [389]

Mr. Clarke: Because we fully recognise the importance of tourism to the economy of this country and its potential for employment generation, we shall be acting with the industry, the tourist boards, local authorities and others to achieve our policy aims. These include: a positive approach from Government for the industry; effective marketing of Britain overseas; reinvigorating domestic tourism; improving the quality of the product; jobs, training and investment in people; and sustainable development.

National Lottery

14. Mr. Illsley: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what plans he has to make the national lottery more responsive to the views of ordinary people. [374]

Mr. Chris Smith: The Government's proposals to reform the national lottery are specifically designed to meet the concerns of the public over the way it has worked to date. The new good causes are ones which have overwhelming public support and our plans to seek a not-for-profit operator will help maintain the public's faith in the lottery by maximising the amount going to the good causes.

15. Mr. Bernard Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage how much lottery money he plans to divert to health and education. [375]

Mr. Smith: We intend to invest £1 billion between now and 2001 in health, education and establishing a national endowment for science and the arts, while maintaining our commitment to the existing good causes.

16. Ms Beverley Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what is the estimated amount that will be available for good causes in the current financial year from the national lottery. [376]

Mr. Fisher: Income to the good causes depends on sales levels of national lottery tickets and other factors such as the interest gained by the good cause fund. We expect that between £1.6 billion and £1.8 billion will be raised for the good causes in this financial year.

19. Mr. Rammell: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage if he will make a statement on his proposals to use funds generated from the midweek lottery to finance health and education projects. [379]

Mr. Smith: The lottery reform Bill will allow lottery funds to make a greater impact than ever before on communities all over the country. The first areas to benefit will be: IT training for teachers, to give them the skills and the materials to exploit new technologies in schools; after-school clubs, to provide homework centres and extra-curricular opportunities in the arts and culture; and healthy living centres, to establish a national network of one-stop centres promoting health and fitness.

20. Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage when funds from the lottery will be diverted to educational projects. [380]

Mr. Smith: The Government will invest £1 billion between now and 2001 in spending on health and education projects and establishing a national endowment for science and the arts. The programme will start as soon as the necessary legislative changes have been made.

24. Mr. Hanson: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what consultations he intends to undertake with health authorities requiring the use of lottery funds for health service expenditure. [386]

Mr. Smith: We will undertake wide consultation on our plans for the national lottery in the coming months and will publish a White Paper in the summer. We will make sure everyone with an interest in the national lottery, including health authorities, has an opportunity to present their views.

Miss Anne Begg: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what proposals he has to restructure the national lottery. [363]

Mr. Tom Clarke: The Bill to reform the lottery will widen access to the benefits of the lottery and introduce a more strategic and co-ordinated approach to distribution of the proceeds. We will also seek a competitive and efficient not-for-profit operator so that the maximum amount of money possible goes to the good causes.

British Broadcasting Corporation

18. Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what proposals he has to meet the chairman of the BBC to discuss matters related to broadcasting. [378]

Mr. Chris Smith: I met the chairman last week for an initial discussion of broadcasting issues.

Piers (Preservation and Development)

21. **Mr. Gareth Thomas:** To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what proposals he has for making funds available to preserve and develop piers. [381]

Mr. Tony Banks: Public funding for the built heritage is available from English Heritage and the National Heritage Memorial Fund. English Heritage has so far contributed £1.1 million for works to piers. The National Heritage Memorial Fund has provided a further £4.5 million, the greater part of which has been lottery funding. Under the terms of the National Heritage Act 1997, the National Heritage Memorial Fund trustees will for the first time be able to consider funding applications in respect of privately owned piers.

Millennium Celebrations

22. **Mr. Ruffley:** To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage if he will make a statement on his Department's plans for millennium celebrations. [384]

Mr. Chris Smith: My Department is responsible for co-ordinating the Government's interests in the millennium. Through the Millennium Commission we will be spending nearly £1.8 billion of national lottery money on projects—great and small—to mark the year

2000. My Department is also working with other organisations involved in the process of planning for the millennium, to ensure proper co-ordination.

Inner-city Theatres

23. **Mr. Corbyn:** To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what plans he has to increase funding for inner-city theatres. [385]

Mr. Fisher: I am a great believer in the power of the arts to help regenerate and build local communities, in inner-city areas in particular. Decisions on the distribution of funds are made by the Arts Council of England and the regional arts boards in conjunction with local authorities and other funding partners, and I know that they are all aware of the wider benefits which the arts can bring to communities.

British Academy of Sport

25. **Mr. Hoyle:** To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage when he expects to make an announcement on the setting up of a British Academy of Sport. [387]

Mr. Tony Banks: The Government are committed to the development of a British Academy of Sport and I am currently considering carefully the three shortlisted bids from the Central, Heyford and Sheffield consortiums. I also intend to visit the sites in the next few weeks. A joint announcement with the United Kingdom Sports Council will be made as soon as possible thereafter.

Written Answers to Questions

Tuesday 20 May 1997

DEFENCE

Gulf War Syndrome

Rev. W. Martin Smyth: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the health needs of those with Gulf War Syndrome. [608]

Dr. Reid: The Government are committed to discharging their responsibilities to those who served their country in the Gulf and are now suffering ill health. They are, accordingly, determined to make a fresh start in ensuring that the health needs of Gulf veterans are met. In order better to understand their concerns, I have invited Gulf veteran's representatives into the Ministry of Defence for a meeting on 29 May.

In the meantime, I have already announced a range of measures to improve my Department's response to their concerns. I have directed that additional resources be made available to clear the backlog of patients waiting to be seen by my Department's Medical Assessment Programme. This aims to provide all those who believe that they are ill as a result of their service in the Gulf with a clinical diagnosis of their medical condition so that appropriate treatment can be recommended to their doctor. This will ensure that my Department more urgently responds to the health needs of Gulf veterans.

In addition, I have announced that research will be undertaken into the possible interaction between the vaccinations and Nerve Agent Pre-Treatment Sets given to our troops to protect against the very real threat of biological or chemical attack. This, together with the two epidemiological studies into the prevalence of ill health amongst Gulf veterans which my Department is already funding, will allow us better to understand the health needs of Gulf veterans.

Civil Service (Ethnic Minorities)

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many civil servants at each grade within his Department were of Asian origin on 5 May. [237]

Mr. Spellar: The number of permanent civilian staff in my Department and its agencies who have recorded their ethnicity as being of Asian origin in the MOD's ethnic origin survey is shown in the table:

Permanent civilian staff of Asian origin by graded equivalence as at 1 April 1997

	Number
Grade 1 to 5	6
Grade 6	4
Grade 7	41
SEO	73
HCO	101
EO	118
AO	165

Permanent civilian staff of Asian origin by graded equivalence as at 1 April 1997

	Number
AA	142
Industrial	90
Total	740

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what proposals he has to increase the number of employees from ethnic minorities within his Department. [238]

Mr. Spellar: As part of its overall commitment to equal opportunities my Department has in place a substantial range of measures aimed at increasing the proportion of civilian staff employed from ethnic minorities. These include: outreach work by recruitment staffs among the ethnic communities; contact with them through careers fairs and schools; targeted job advertising; the inclusion of welcoming statements in job adverts; ethnicity monitoring and numerical targets in the Departmental Management Plan. In addition, my Department has sponsored a number of Windsor Fellows in recent years and is a member of the "Race for Opportunity" campaign. Future proposals for action in respect of civilian employees will emerge from work currently being undertaken to take forward the implementation of the recommendations of a recent study into MOD's ethnic minority employment initiatives.

National Service Memorial

Mr. John Cryer: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has to erect a memorial to Britain's post-1945 National Servicemen. [174]

Mr. Spellar: The Ministry of Defence has no plans to erect a memorial to Britain's post-war National Servicemen.

It has been a long-standing policy of successive Governments that the cost of memorials is usually met not from public funds but from private donations or public subscription.

In the event that such funding were to be found, my Department would be happy to assist in identifying a suitable site and to provide representation at any dedication ceremony.

Nuclear Weapons

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is his Department's policy on the limited use of nuclear weapons to warn an aggressor. [257]

Dr. Reid: The Government fully support NATO policy on the continuing requirement for a sub-strategic capability as a crucial element of credible deterrence. In extreme circumstances of self-defence such a capability would allow the limited use of nuclear weapons to send an aggressor a political message of the Alliance's resolve to defend itself.

Salisbury Plain Training Area

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what discussions his Department or its agents or

consultants have had with Tilshead Parish Council on the (a) choice of route, (b) construction and (c) management of the southern range road in Salisbury Plain Training Area. [92]

Mr. Spellar: All Parish Councils affected by the Southern Range Road, including Tilshead, were informed about the proposals and the consultation process in April 1996. Following this, the Works Project Sponsor and his consultant visited representatives of Tilshead Parish Council on 13 May 1996 to discuss route selection and answer queries on other aspects of the proposal. The Project Sponsor and his consultant visited representatives of Tilshead Parish Council again on 18 December 1996, the date on which my Department submitted a Notice of Planned Development to the three District Councils involved, to inform them of the chosen route and to answer any further queries.

Former RAF Chilmark

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the authorities, agencies, organisations, companies and individuals who have had (a) correspondence and (b) meetings with his officials or agents to discuss the future use of the Chilmark section of the former RAF Chilmark. [93]

Mr. Spellar: The following authorities have all been involved in discussions over the future of the Chilmark section of RAF Chilmark: Wiltshire County Council, Chilmark Parish Council, Dinton Parish Council, Sutton Mandeville Parish Council, Wiltshire Wildlife Trust, the Rural Development Commission, English Nature, English Heritage and the Environment Agency. I am withholding information on the companies and individuals who have expressed an interest in the site for reasons of commercial confidentiality under exemption 7 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information.

Former Royal Navy Armaments Depot, Broughton Moor

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will ensure the fullest possible consultation with elected representatives and other authorities prior to any decisions being taken on the future of the Broughton Moor former RNAD dump. [586]

Mr. Spellar: A decision on the method of disposal is not anticipated for some time. Full consultations with elected representatives and other authorities will be undertaken on the future of the former RNAD Broughton Moor before any decision is taken.

Rudolf Hess

Mr. Rhodri Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the principal steps taken by his Department to clarify responsibility for registering the death of Rudolf Hess and for providing proper certification of it. [759]

Dr. Reid: Following an approach by the Hess family in 1995, it was found that the record of Rudolf Hess's death had been incorrectly passed to the General Register Office under a statute which was not applicable. The registration, which had not previously been questioned, was therefore cancelled by the Registrar General after consulting my Department and the Foreign and

Commonwealth Office. This decision does not, however, affect the validity of the death certificate, which was issued as the result of an autopsy conducted under arrangements agreed by the Four Powers.

Mr. Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what arrangements were in force under the relevant quadripartite agreements to carry out (a) an autopsy and (b) certification of cause of death as regards deaths of prisoners in Spandau prison at the time of the death of Rudolf Hess. [761]

Dr. Reid: Under arrangements agreed in 1983, by which time Hess was the only remaining prisoner in Spandau prison, an autopsy was conducted by a British pathologist at the British Military Hospital in Berlin in the presence of observers representing the Four Powers. Responsibility for certifying the cause of death lay with the pathologist.

Mr. Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if the quadripartite agreement of 20 March 1952 governing deaths of prisoners in Spandau prison (HCOM/P(152)17) was still in force at the time of the death of Rudolf Hess. [760]

Dr. Reid: We are aware of a document with the reference HICOM/P(52)17. This was not a quadripartite agreement but a discussion paper drawn up by the Law Committee of the Allied High Commission Germany. As such, it was not in force at any time.

Yorkshire and Humberside

Mr. Bayley: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many (a) service and (b) Ministry of Defence civilian personnel were employed at bases and establishments in Yorkshire and Humberside (i) in 1979, (ii) in 1992 and (iii) at the latest date for which figures are available. [599]

Mr. Spellar: The strengths of service and Ministry of Defence permanent civilian personnel employed at bases and establishments in Yorkshire and Humberside at the given dates are as follows:

- (i) 1979—13,900 service; 10,300 civilian.
- (ii) 1992—15,800 service; 5,500 civilian.
- (iii) 1996—12,200 service; 3,300 civilian.

The strengths refer to situation date 1 July except for 1979 civilian strength which refer to 1 January. 1 July 1996 is the latest date available. Civilian numbers are full-time equivalents. In 1979 and 1992 part timers were counted as half of full time. In 1996 they were counted by the proportion of conditioned hours worked.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

School Standards

Mrs. Gisela Stuart: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what action he proposes to take to ensure that schools under special measures make rapid progress in improving the standard of education they offer. [999]

Mr. Byers: I have today written to the Chair of Governors at eighteen schools which have been under special measures for an extended period, and which are making only limited progress. I am proposing additional

support for these schools. First, my Department will fund consultancy help from a team of headteachers and others with direct experience of improving weak schools. Second, my colleagues and I will discuss with the LEAs responsible for these schools, and with the Funding Agency for Schools, what further action they could take to promote rapid recovery. The list of schools is as follows:

Abbey Farm Middle School, Norfolk
 Ashburton High School, Croydon
 Blakelaw School, Newcastle
 Dulwich High School, Southwark
 Earl Marshal School, Sheffield
 Handsworth Wood Boys, Birmingham
 Ingram High School, Croydon
 Kelsey Park GM School, Bromley
 Lea Green Special School, Waltham Forest
 Lillian Baylis School, Lambeth
 Morningside Primary School, Hackney
 Mostyn Gardens Primary School, Lambeth
 Our Lady of Fatima GM School, Liverpool
 Rams Episcopal School, Hackney
 Saint Mary of the Angels School, Westminster
 South Benwell Primary School, Newcastle
 Southfields GM School, Kent
 Upbury Manor GM School, Kent.

Class Sizes

Mr. Baldry: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will publish for each local education authority the number of classes at key stage 1 which have 31 or more pupils. [72]

Mr. Byers: The information requested is shown in the following table.

Numbers of Key Stage 1 classes¹ taught by one teacher with 31 or more pupils in maintained primary schools in each local education authority area in England

January 1996	Number
Corporation of London	n/a
Camden	4
Greenwich	15
Hackney	13
Hammersmith	10
Islington	14
Kensington and Chelsea	2
Lambeth	12
Lewisham	18
Southwark	22
Tower Hamlets	11
Wandsworth	35
Westminster	7
Barking	23
Barnet	23
Bexley	123
Brent	24
Bromley	159
Croydon	109
Ealing	78
Enfield	113
Haringey	18
Harrow	60
Havering	76
Hillingdon	43
Hounslow	72
Kingston upon Thames	100

Numbers of Key Stage 1 classes¹ taught by one teacher with 31 or more pupils in maintained primary schools in each local education authority area in England

January 1996	Number
Merton	58
Newham	23
Redbridge	99
Richmond upon Thames	44
Sutton	32
Waltham Forest	32
Birmingham	329
Coventry	109
Dudley	88
Sandwell	130
Solihull	117
Walsall	73
Wolverhampton	96
Knowsley	49
Liverpool	139
St. Helens	64
Sefton	137
Wirral	72
Bolton	143
Bury	88
Manchester	93
Oldham	105
Rochdale	93
Salford	89
Stockport	95
Tameside	131
Trafford	95
Wigan	131
Barnsley	70
Doncaster	108
Rotherham	45
Sheffield	97
Bradford	165
Calderdale	76
Kirklees	134
Leeds	264
Wakefield	82
Gateshead	22
Newcastle upon Tyne	79
North Tyneside	69
South Tyneside	40
Sunderland	39
Isles of Scilly	0
Avon	312
Bedfordshire	174
Berkshire	151
Buckinghamshire	220
Cambridgeshire	164
Cheshire	308
Cleveland	92
Cornwall	135
Cumbria	138
Derbyshire	363
Devon	233
Dorset	253
Durham	181
East Sussex	277
Essex	311
Gloucestershire	157
Hampshire	532
Hereford and Worcester	137
Hertfordshire	261
Humberside	272
Isle of Wight	28
Kent	461
Lancashire	610
Leicestershire	184
Lincolnshire	126
Norfolk	127
North Yorkshire	142
Northamptonshire	149

Numbers of Key Stage 1 classes¹ taught by one teacher with 31 or more pupils in maintained primary schools in each local education authority area in England

January 1996	Number
Northumberland	121
Nottinghamshire	197
Oxfordshire	72
Shropshire	111
Somerset	132
Staffordshire	374
Suffolk	93
Surrey	213
Warwickshire	214
West Sussex	123
Wiltshire	126
England	13,502

n/a = not applicable.

¹ Figures include reception classes.

Civil Service (Ethnic Minorities)

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many civil servants at each grade within his Department were of Asian origin on 5 May. [241]

Dr. Howells: The numbers of Asian staff at each grade within the Department on 5 May are shown in the following table. For convenience the figures have been grouped into grade equivalents.

Grade level	Number of Asian staff
Permanent Secretary	0
Director/Director general	0
Divisional Manager	—
Grade 6	0
Grade 7	6
SEO	0
HEO	8
EO	29
AO	42
AA	17

¹ The number of Asian staff at Divisional Manager is less than 6 and is therefore not shown, in accordance with the Department's agreed code of conduct on the use of ethnic monitoring data.

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what proposals he has to increase the number of employees from ethnic minorities within his Department. [242]

Dr. Howells: In recruiting staff, DFEE aims to ensure that vacancies are brought to the attention of all groups in the community, including people from ethnic minorities. To achieve this, the Department has used a range of methods including advertising vacancies in publications which are widely read by people from ethnic minorities; direct recruitment in universities with high numbers of students from ethnic minorities; and asking Job Centres recruiting on its behalf to use outreach methods to make all groups aware of vacancies, for example through local community organisations and educational institutions. The Department will continue to make appropriate use of such methods, and to monitor their effectiveness.

As a Champion of the Race for Opportunity campaign sponsored by Business in the Community, over the next year the Department will be carrying out an audit of its

employment practices, including recruitment and selection procedures, to ensure that they do not create barriers for people from ethnic minorities.

Pupil Costs

Mr. Forth: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what is the average annual cost of educating (a) a primary pupil and (b) a secondary pupil in England.

Mr. Byers: In 1995–96, the latest year for which data are available, the net institutional expenditure per pre-primary and primary pupil in England was £1,687 and per secondary pupil was £2,286. [645]

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list by local education authority the average annual cost of (a) a primary school place and (b) a secondary school place for the last year for which figures are available. [504]

Mr. Byers: The following table sets out for each LEA in England net expenditure per pupil within LEA maintained primary and pre-primary schools and secondary schools for 1995–96, the latest year for which figures are available.

*LEA maintained schools
Net institutional expenditure per pupil 1995–96*

	Pre-primary and primary £	Secondary £
Corporation of London	3,823	0
Camden	2,278	2,888
Greenwich	2,201	2,768
Hackney	2,138	2,963
Hammersmith and Fulham	2,370	3,328
Islington	2,234	2,941
Kensington and Chelsea	2,618	3,602
Lambeth	2,629	3,859
Lewisham	2,108	2,765
Southwark	2,147	2,840
Tower Hamlets	2,461	3,206
Wandsworth	2,237	2,953
City of Westminster	2,466	2,863
Barking and Dagenham	1,921	2,473
Barnet	1,811	2,533
Bexley	1,536	2,291
Brent	1,793	2,418
Bromley	1,664	1,851
Croydon	1,919	2,543
Ealing	1,974	2,477
Enfield	1,792	2,367
Haringey	2,317	3,018
Harrow	2,095	2,660
Havering	1,704	2,622
Hillingdon	1,813	2,624
Hounslow	1,952	2,535
Kingston upon Thames	1,754	2,374
Merton	1,862	2,593
Newham	1,739	2,546
Redbridge	1,763	2,510
Richmond upon Thames	1,874	2,431
Sutton	1,813	2,480
Waltham Forest	2,104	2,736
Birmingham	1,912	2,555
Coventry	1,770	2,477
Dudley	1,529	2,175
Sandwell	1,733	2,362
Solihull	1,606	2,241
Walsall	1,576	2,158
Wolverhampton	1,680	2,460

LEA maintained schools
Net institutional expenditure per pupil 1995-96

	<i>Pre-primary and primary £</i>	<i>Secondary £</i>
Knowsley	1,574	2,259
Liverpool	1,603	2,406
St. Helens	1,423	2,063
Sefton	1,524	2,304
Wirral	1,610	2,323
Bolton	1,681	2,287
Bury	1,517	2,081
Manchester	1,611	2,305
Oldham	1,654	2,294
Rochdale	1,582	2,275
Salford	1,540	2,226
Stockport	1,550	2,225
Tameside	1,509	2,010
Trafford	1,515	2,433
Wigan	1,613	2,307
Barnsley	1,543	2,089
Doncaster	1,716	2,292
Rotherham	1,686	2,211
Sheffield	1,679	2,182
Bradford	1,693	2,030
Calderdale	1,652	2,485
Kirkless	1,623	2,258
Leeds	1,701	2,259
Wakefield	1,600	2,055
Gateshead	1,663	2,250
Newcastle upon Tyne	1,705	2,346
North Tyneside	1,618	2,201
South Tyneside	1,542	2,096
Sunderland	1,635	2,228
Isles of Scilly	2,206	4,347
Avon	1,683	2,426
Bedfordshire	1,694	2,163
Berkshire	1,606	2,211
Buckinghamshire	1,625	2,288
Cambridgeshire	1,566	2,172
Cheshire	1,581	2,147
Cleveland	1,436	2,139
Cornwall	1,628	2,229
Cumbria	1,705	2,287
Derbyshire	1,583	2,234
Devon	1,540	2,187
Dorset	1,495	2,067
Durham	1,653	2,072
East Sussex	1,721	2,395
Essex	1,730	2,325
Gloucestershire	1,494	2,082
Hampshire	1,671	2,210
Hereford and Worcester	1,616	2,055
Hertfordshire	1,756	2,366
Humberside	1,632	2,313
Isle of Wight	1,640	2,085
Kent	1,599	2,343
Lancashire	1,621	2,268
Leicestershire	1,623	2,269
Lincolnshire	1,641	2,412
Norfolk	1,609	2,319
North Yorkshire	1,579	2,224
Northamptonshire	1,578	2,163
Northumberland	1,595	1,990
Nottinghamshire	1,679	2,333
Oxfordshire	1,610	2,199
Shropshire	1,573	2,384
Somerset	1,653	2,212
Staffordshire	1,530	2,061
Suffolk	1,692	2,165
Surrey	1,841	2,260
Warwickshire	1,621	2,225
West Sussex	1,678	2,239
Wiltshire	1,645	2,251

Teachers' Pensions

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when the consultation on teachers' pensions will be completed; and when the Government's decision will be published. [573]

Mr. Byers: The consultation period ends on 9 June. My right hon. Friend will take and announce decisions after that date.

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when he plans to meet the teacher unions to discuss reform of the teachers' superannuation scheme. [572]

Mr. Byers: I plan to meet the teacher unions shortly to discuss a variety of subjects. My right hon. Friend will decide in due course on a timetable for the review of the teachers' superannuation scheme and on how and when to seek the views of the teacher unions on that particular topic.

International Labour Organisation

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what is the policy of Her Majesty's Government concerning changes in the voting system at the International Labour Organisation; and if he will make a statement. [500]

Mr. Andrew Smith: The Government are not aware that there are any proposals to change the voting system at the ILO. Any proposals to change the system would need to be considered by the ILO's Governing Body.

Assisted Places

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list those schools which currently have assisted places indicating the number of places currently held by assisted places pupils. [506]

Mr. Byers: I am placing in the Library of the House a list of the 355 schools in England participating in the assisted places scheme in the current academic year 1996-97 showing the number of assisted place holders at each school.

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list those schools which will be offering assisted places from 1 September indicating the number of places being offered. [508]

Mr. Byers: I am placing in the Library of the House a list of the 481 schools in England which will be offering assisted places from 1 September 1997 showing the number of entry places available at each school.

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what is the estimated cost to public funds of the assisted places scheme for the financial year 1997-98. [509]

Mr. Byers: Planned expenditure on the scheme in England in financial year 1997-98 is £140 million.

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if she will list those schools

currently participating in the music and ballet assisted places scheme, indicating the number of places currently held by pupils under the scheme. [507]

Mr. Byers: The information requested is given in the following table:

Music and ballet aided pupil scheme: Academic year 1996-97

<i>Name of school</i>	<i>Number of aided pupils</i>
Chetham's School of Music, Manchester	257
The Purcell School of Music, Harrow	95
Wells Cathedral School, Somerset	70
Yehudi Menuhin School, Cobham	34
The Royal Ballet School, London	173
Elmhurst Ballet School, Camberley	10
Arts Educational School, Tring	5

DUCHY OF LANCASTER

Property Services Agency

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster what is his Department's estimate of the annual cost to the Property Services Agency of renting Archway tower, Junction road, London N19; and what plans he has to reduce this cost. [510]

Dr. David Clark: Responsibility for this matter has been delegated under the terms of its framework document to the Property Advisers to the Civil Estate (PACE) under its Chief Executive, Mr. Malcolm Bowles. The Agency is therefore responding to this question.

Letter from M. H. Bowles to Mr. Jeremy Corbyn, dated 19 May 1997:

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster has asked me, as acting Chief Executive of PACE, to reply to your question about Archway Tower, Junction Road, N.19.

You will know from our letters to you, dated 29 April 1996 and 22 January 1997, that PACE has responsibility for Archway Tower which is held on a lease by the Secretary of State for the Environment and would need extensive modernisation and refurbishment prior to re-use as offices.

The annual cost of holding the building is approximately £1,100,000 including security and maintenance. In addition, renovation works are shortly to be carried out to the ground floor exterior and approaches, to accord with the London Borough of Islington's Urban Design Strategy for Archway and to improve the prospects of disposal.

Letting agents are appointed to dispose of the lease for offices but demand is coming significantly from residential developers. Discussions are continuing with the owners of the property and the local planning authority to consider a change of use of the building to residential. In order to leave no stone unturned, the possibility of a joint disposal with our landlords is as you know also being actively pursued by our consultants.

Food Standards Agency

Mr. Pickthall: To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster what action he proposes to take in respect of Professor Philip James' report into the establishment of an independent food standards agency; and if he will make a statement. [955]

Dr. David Clark: Professor James' report was published on 8 May, and welcomed by the Prime Minister as an excellent foundation upon which the Government could build. The Prime Minister added that we need to create a structure that is open and transparent, and which acts—and is seen to act—in the interests of consumers.

The Prime Minister has established a new Ministerial Group on Food Safety, which I will chair, to take forward Professor James' proposals. Members will include Ministers from the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, Department of Health, the Cabinet Office, the Scottish Office, the Welsh Office and the Northern Ireland Office. As a first step the Government are consulting widely on Professor James' Report. Consultees have been invited to send their comments to the Cabinet Office by 20 June.

Copies of the Report have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses of Parliament.

The Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food will be responsible for preparing a White Paper and the necessary legislation. He will be doing this in close consultation with the Secretary of State for Health and in accordance with the conclusions of the Ministerial Committee. The Minister has already taken steps to ensure greater openness in the working practices of MAFF and more responsiveness to the needs of the public.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many people held under immigration law at HMP Winson Green began a hunger strike on 7 May; and how many are still refusing food. [166]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Two immigration detainees refused food at Her Majesty's Prison Winson Green on 7 May and were joined by a further nine on 8 May. Eight detainees were still refusing prison prepared meals at 10:00 hrs on 19 May, although all are taking fluids. I am told that none of them is giving the prison medical officer cause for concern.

Police Complaints Authority

Mr. Todd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what new appointments have been made to the Police Complaints Authority. [956]

Mr. Straw: Mrs. Linda Allan and Ms Lorna Whyte have accepted invitations to serve as Members of the Police Complaints Authority made in late 1996 by my predecessor as Secretary of State, the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard). Mrs. Allan previously served as Head of Networks and Faculty Support with the Royal College of General Practitioners. Ms Whyte was formerly a community relations consultant with the Home Office. They both took up their posts on 6 May. The term of the appointments is three years.

Criminal Cases Review Commission

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what representations he has received

regarding resources available to the Criminal Cases Review Commission; and if he will consider increasing the number of members appointed to serve on its board. [153]

Mr. Michael [*holding answer 19 May 1997*]: My Department has had extensive discussions with the Criminal Cases Review Commission on a range of issues relating to its establishment, including the resources it needs. There are no plans at present to increase the number of members appointed to the Commission, but this will be considered if it seems desirable in the light of experience.

We have previously expressed considerable concern at the delay in setting up the Commission and hope the Commission itself will wish to inject a greater sense of urgency into the review of these cases and will keep the work of the Commission under close scrutiny.

PRIME MINISTER

India, Pakistan and Bangladesh

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Prime Minister what plans he has to visit India, Pakistan and Bangladesh to commemorate 50 years of their independence from Britain. [714]

The Prime Minister: Her Majesty, The Queen, and His Royal Highness, The Duke of Edinburgh, will pay State Visits to India and Pakistan in October, and the Prince of Wales visited Bangladesh in February. I hope to visit South Asia before too long.

Roisin McAliskey

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Prime Minister what representations he has received from (a) the Government of the Irish Republic and (b) others about the continuing detention at HMP Holloway of Ms Roisin McAliskey; and if he will make a statement. [155]

The Prime Minister [*holding answer 19 May 1997*]: As far as I am aware, I have received no representations from the Government of the Irish Republic. There have been nine representations from members of the public and others about Ms McAliskey.

TREASURY

Forecasting (Market Testing)

Mr. Timms: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the feasibility and scope of possible market testing of the Treasury's forecasting function. [954]

Mr. Gordon Brown: The Government support market testing as one means to secure better value for money in the provision of public services.

Initial steps in the market testing process are to identify the feasibility and scope of services subject to market testing, and to check whether the potential value for money gains are sufficient to outweigh the costs of testing the market. In line with this procedure, consultants KPMG Management Consulting were appointed earlier this year to advise on the feasibility and scope, including value for

money, of a market test of all, or some part of, the Treasury's macro-economic and public finances forecasting and monitoring function.

KPMG have now delivered their report, and I have considered it carefully. The touchstone must be value for money, that is achieving the most efficient and cost-effective method of delivering the forecast.

After extensive consultations, both inside and outside the Treasury, KPMG have noted that the quality of Treasury forecast output is generally perceived to be high, and that a decision to opt for an outside provider is unlikely to turn on this issue. In considering whether the market test would yield better value for money, KPMG have advised that the balance of potential resource savings and costs would not justify a market test. A copy of the KPMG report will be placed in the Library.

In the interests of securing best value for money, I am content to accept the KPMG advice, on merit, that the Treasury's forecasting function should not be subject to market testing, because in this case market testing would not lead to savings. I am concerned, however, to ensure that the forecasting function remains of high quality, and that it is carried out with the greatest efficiency. I intend to set rigorous targets for achieving that. With this in mind, I have noted that KPMG outlined possible internal reforms designed to use Treasury forecasting staff more flexibly and broaden their experience. I have asked my officials to pursue these suggestions.

Price Stability

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement about the level of interest rates needed now to create price stability in two years' time. [286]

Mrs. Liddell: The Chancellor judged it necessary to raise interest rates on 6 May by a $\frac{1}{4}$ percentage point, to $6\frac{1}{4}$ per cent., in order to put us back on track to achieve the Government's inflation target. He also decided to give operational responsibility to the Bank of England to set interest rates at the level necessary to meet the Government's inflation target.

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is his definition of price stability. [302]

Mrs. Liddell: The Government are committed to meeting the previous target for low and stable inflation of $2\frac{1}{2}$ per cent. or less.

Landfill Tax

Mr. Hinchliffe: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the names and addresses of those landfill operators who are currently paying landfill tax to HM Customs and Excise. [68]

Dawn Primarolo: The information requested will shortly be published by HM Customs and Excise. Copies will be placed in the Library of the House as soon as they are available.

Inheritance Tax Exemptions

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make it his policy to collect

information on the number of members of the public who have exercised their right to require owners of chattels conditionally exempt from inheritance tax to allow viewing of these objects. [282]

Dawn Primarolo: I have noted the suggestion. The current arrangements are designed to ensure that qualifying chattels are preserved by their own owners and that these chattels are available for viewing by members of the public who wish to exercise their right of access under the law.

Taxation

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is the total level of tax per head of population for each EU country taking into account all sources of revenue. [295]

Dawn Primarolo: The information requested is provided in the table.

EU member state	Tax revenue per capita
Austria	6,863
Belgium	6,818
Denmark	9,390
Finland	5,877
France	6,577
Germany	7,920
Greece	2,058
Republic of Ireland	3,540
Italy	4,816
Luxembourg	10,566
Netherlands	6,482
Portugal	1,884
Spain	2,864
Sweden	7,455
United Kingdom	3,875

Source:

Revenue Statistics 1965 to 1995 OECD 1996 edition.

The information provided refers to 1994 as complete information for the year since then is not yet available.

Monetary Policy Committee

Dr. Marek: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what factors the Monetary Policy Committee will take into account when setting interest rates other than those relating to the meeting of the Government's inflation target. [138]

Mrs. Liddell [holding answer 19 May 1997]: The Monetary Policy Committee will be responsible for delivering price stability as defined by the Government's inflation target and, without prejudice to this objective, will support the Government's economic policy, including their objectives for growth and employment.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

UNESCO

Mr. Hogg: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what estimate she has made of the cost of rejoining UNESCO; and from what budget it will be met. [122]

Clare Short: We plan to rejoin UNESCO with effect from 1 July. Our contribution for 1997 will cover the period 1 July–31 December 1997 at a cost of about £5 million. This will be met from the contingency reserve in the development budget.

Democratic People's Republic of Korea

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development (1) what plans she has for further bilateral assistance to flood victims in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea; [280]

(2) what plans Her Majesty's Government have to contribute to international and multilateral donations of food and medical goods to flood victims in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. [281]

Clare Short: We have provided over £968,000 in emergency grants since September 1995 to assist flood victims in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. Funds have been channelled through international appeals by the United Nations and the International Federation of the Red Cross.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Whitemoor Prison

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will place a full transcript of the second Whitemoor escape trial in the Library. [158]

Mr. Hoon: The question concerns a matter which has been assigned to the Court Service under the terms of its framework document. I have therefore asked the chief executive to write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from Michael Huebner to Mr. Kevin McNamara dated 20 May 1997:

PQ 98/16: AVAILABILITY OF THE FULL TRANSCRIPT OF THE SECOND WHITEMOOR ESCAPE TRIAL

The Parliamentary Secretary of the Lord Chancellor's Department has asked me to reply to your Question as to whether a copy of the full transcript of the second Whitemoor escape trial will be placed in the House of Commons Library.

A transcript of the rulings has been made and a copy placed in the Library. A copy of the full transcript of the trial could only be provided at disproportionate cost.

WALES

Deeside College of Further Education

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will visit Deeside College of Further Education. [632]

Mr. Hain: I intend to visit a number of further education institutions in Wales this year but I have yet to finalise my programme.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Nigeria

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans he has to promote (a) the return of democracy and (b) respect for human rights in Nigeria; and if he will make a statement. [517]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: We intend to make the protection and promotion of human rights a central part of our foreign policy. I am therefore extremely concerned by the lack of accountable democratic government and continuing human rights violations in Nigeria. We are actively considering what further measures we can take with EU, Commonwealth and other partners.

Bahrain (Human Rights)

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he proposes to make to the Government of Bahrain concerning abuses of human rights. [518]

Mr. Fatchett: We intend to have a close and frank relationship with Bahrain. On 15 May, I had a useful discussion with the Bahraini ambassador on human rights and other issues. The Government of Bahrain is well aware of our concerns about the human rights situation there.

Antarctica

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans he has to ensure agreement is reached amongst Antarctic treaty countries to enable a secretariat to be established. [175]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: We intend to review our policy on the Antarctic Treaty Secretariat after the forthcoming Antarctic treaty consultative meeting in Christchurch, New Zealand.

Mission Statement

Mr. Hogg: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what was the cost to public funds of the press conference held in the Locarno room on Monday 12 May, at which the Foreign Secretary outlined his mission statement, separately indicating the cost of the film background. [121]

Mr. Fatchett: The cost of public funds of the 12 May press conference was £19,000. The rostrum structure will remain in service. An additional sum of £7,000 was necessary for the hire of the video wall.

Mr. Wilshire: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs who made the videotape used at the official launch of his mission statement; who supervised the making of the videotape; and what was the cost to public funds. [307]

Mr. Fatchett: The video which had its first showing at my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary's press conference was an abridged and re-edited version of a film originally made for the Hanover Fair. The video was produced in-house by this Department, and drew on our own television archive, thereby limiting the cost to £28,000. The video will be shown in coming months at other events.

Mr. Wilshire: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what was the cost to public funds of the official launch of his mission statement. [178]

Mr. Fatchett: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave today to the right hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg).

Mr. Fallon: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what was the cost of producing, launching, distributing and publicising his Department's mission statement. [757]

Mr. Fatchett: I refer the hon. Member to the answers I gave today to the right hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham and the hon. Member for Spelthorne (Mr. Wilshire).

Yemen

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what is the policy of Her Majesty's Government on the application for membership by the Republic of Yemen at the forthcoming Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting. [288]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: The Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in Edinburgh will consider a report on Commonwealth membership criteria. The Commonwealth Secretary-General has advised Yemen that no applications for membership will be considered until that has taken place. We welcome the fact that the Commonwealth is attracting interest from potential new members, but will emphasise the importance of full compliance with the Harare declaration, which sets the Commonwealth political and human rights standards.

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans he has to visit the Republic of Yemen. [290]

Mr. Fatchett: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary looks forward to visiting Yemen in due course, although he has no plans to do so in the immediate future.

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the recent elections in the Republic of Yemen. [291]

Mr. Fatchett: We welcome the successful completion of parliamentary elections in Yemen last month. They marked a further step in Yemen's recovery since the damaging civil war of 1994. Yemen's democracy is young, and although there were some irregularities, the international observers concluded that, on balance, the elections were "reasonably free and fair". We welcome this, and look forward to future co-operation with the new Yemeni Government and Parliament.

Civil Service (Ethnic Minorities)

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many civil servants at each grade within his Department were of Asian origin on 5 May. [247]

Mr. Fatchett: Staff within this Department are not obliged to report their ethnic origins. The information in the table is based on voluntary returns to a survey into ethnic origins carried out in 1989 to which 89 per cent.

of staff responded. We have since invited all new entrants to complete the questionnaire, and those that have done so are also included.

Officers of Asian origin by grade (including those of part-Asian origin) as at 1 April 1997

	Number
DS5S/HCS6	1
DS5/HCS7	2
DS7D/8/HEO (D)	4
DS7M/HEO	7
DS9/EO	20
DS10/EA/AO	47
AA/SGB2	9
Total	90

These figures do not include officers on unpaid leave.

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on current Anglo-Yemeni relations. [289]

Mr. Fatchett: We enjoy good relations with Yemen. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has recently written to the Foreign Minister of Yemen, stressing our wish to strengthen co-operation between our two countries.

Hong Kong

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs which Commonwealth Governments are being invited to the Hong Kong handover ceremony; and at what level. [268]

Mr. Fatchett: The handover ceremony will be a joint occasion, invitations to which will be issued jointly on behalf of Britain and China. We have agreed with China to invite countries and international organisations with the strongest links to Hong Kong, such as all European Union and Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation member states, plus a small number of other countries with special links with Hong Kong, including several members of the Commonwealth. Invited countries will generally be represented by their Foreign Ministers. We will announce the list of countries in due course. Copies will be placed in the Libraries of the House. I can, however, say that we and China have agreed to invite the Commonwealth Secretary-General. We are delighted that he has accepted.

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what proposals he has to increase the number of employees from ethnic minorities within his Department. [248]

Mr. Fatchett: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary regards increasing the number of employees from ethnic minorities in this Department as a priority. My noble Friend Baroness Symons has been asked to give careful and swift consideration to ways of improving the policies already in place in this Department. When proposals have been agreed, my noble Friend will write to the hon. Member and copies will be placed in the Libraries of the House.

Social Chapter

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what powers the United Kingdom will have to amend or improve social

and employment laws in the United Kingdom without the consent of the EC once it has signed the social chapter. [303]

Mr. Doug Henderson: Accepting the social chapter will not affect the UK's power to alter our own social and employment legislation except in so far as UK legislation will have to comply with measures adopted under these Treaty provisions in the same way that it already has to comply with other aspects of Community law.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Arable Area Payments Scheme

Mr. Tipping: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many payments were made and what was the total amount paid under the arable area payments scheme in 1996-97. [124]

Mr. Paul Murphy [holding answer 19 May 1997]: In 1996-97, 3,372 payments were made and the total amount paid was £8,807,000.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Trade (India)

Mr. Vaz: To ask the President of the Board of Trade when she plans to lead a trade mission to India within the framework of the Indo-British Partnership initiative. [278]

Mrs. Beckett: At present, I have no firm plans to lead a UK trade mission to India. Such a mission accompanied my predecessor to India as recently as January 1997. I am, however, aware of the outstanding success of the Indo-British Partnership and will be giving it my fullest support.

One-day Sales

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what plans she has to introduce further regulation of one-day sales. [265]

Mr. Nigel Griffiths: I am aware that some one-day sales have raised concerns about exploitation of consumers and strongly support the action some trading standards departments have taken to warn consumers of their dangers. I have instituted an urgent review of this and will consider the need for further regulation.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Housing Benefit

Mr. Bennett: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if she will make a statement about the rules affecting single people and housing benefit. [37]

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans she has to implement proposals to set housing benefit for single people under 60 years by reference to rent levels for shared accommodation; and if she will make a statement. [607]

Mr. Bradley: We are currently reviewing the rules affecting single people and housing benefit. We will make an announcement in due course.

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what is her estimate of the shortfall between the total amount of housing benefit paid and the net amount paid by tenants for housing for each year since 1992. [172]

Mr. Bradley: The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is in the table.

Estimated housing benefit expenditure (Great Britain)

£ millions

	<i>Contractual rent of tenants on housing benefit</i>	<i>Housing benefit paid</i>	<i>Shortfall</i>
1992-93	9,154	7,901	1,253
1993-94	10,483	9,213	1,270
1994-95	11,527	10,120	1,407
1995-96	12,667	10,885	1,782

Sources:

1. Benefit Housing Management Information System.
2. Social security departmental report—Government expenditure plans March 1997.
3. Rent officer statistics.

Notes:

1. Contractual rent may include charges which are not eligible for housing benefit. These include water, sewage and ineligible service charges such as laundry, cleaning, sports facilities etc.
2. The figures for 1996-97 are not yet available.

Pensioner Incomes

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what is her estimate of the income levels of the poorest 10 per cent. of pensioners in the current year. [167]

Mr. Denham: The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is as follows.

It is estimated that in 1994-95, the latest date for which information is available, the median average net income before housing costs for the bottom decile of the all pensioner units income distribution was £65.20.

Notes:

1. The estimate refers to all pensioner units. A pensioner unit is defined to be either a single person over state pension age, or a couple where the man, assumed to be the head, is aged over state pension age.
2. The methodology is in accordance with that used to create table 5 of "The Pensioners' Incomes Series 1994-95", a copy of which is available in the Library.
3. Figures are rounded to the nearest 10p and are in July 1994 prices.

Source:

The Pensioners' Income Series 1994-95.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Cattle Diseases

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if (a) maedi-visna, (b) caprine arthritis and (c) encephalitis have been identified in cattle. [292]

Mr. Rooker: My veterinary staff are not aware of maedi-visna, caprine arthritis or encephalitis ever having been identified in cattle in Great Britain.

Quarantine (Dogs and Cats)

Mr. Key: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will review quarantine arrangements for dogs and cats entering the United Kingdom. [585]

Mr. Rooker: Yes.

British Beef (McDonald's)

Mr. Key: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will meet representatives of McDonald's Restaurants Ltd. to discuss consumption of British beef. [584]

Mr. Rooker: At present there is no firm arrangement to meet McDonald's Restaurants Ltd. However, we are aware of the company's position in the market and expect to arrange a meeting in due course.

SCOTLAND

Opencast Mining

Mr. Home Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement on Government policy on planning considerations for opencast mining; and if he will advise the reporter at the public inquiry into plans for Tynemouth at Ormiston of the implications of any proposed changes to planning guidelines. [132]

Mr. Chisholm: Government planning policy in Scotland in relation to opencast mining is set out in National Planning Policy Guideline 4: Land for Mineral Working. Good practice advice in relation to the environmental effects of such development is contained in Planning Advice Note 50: Controlling The Environmental Effects of Surface Mineral Workings. Both publications are available in the House of Commons Library.

While consideration is being given to current policy on opencast mineral extraction to ascertain whether some change is needed, the inquiry into the Tynemouth, Ormiston opencast proposal ended on 15 May. In the event that a new policy was to be introduced prior to a decision being taken on the appeal, which was relevant for the decision, the hon. Member can be assured that the final decision would be taken in the light of that policy and in accordance with the Inquiries Procedure Rules.

A1 Dualling

Mr. Home Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement on the progress of plans to dual the A1 trunk road between Haddington and Dunbar. [133]

Mr. Chisholm: The Scottish Office published a revised draft enabling compulsory purchase orders on 28 June and 25 October which attracted a number of objections. These were considered at a Public Local Inquiry in Haddington between 11 and 13 February 1997. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland is awaiting the findings and recommendations of the Reporter.

Glasgow

Mr. David Marshall: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland when he intends to meet Glasgow City Council to discuss the problems facing the city; and if he will make a statement. [582]

Mr. Chisholm [holding answer 19 May 1997]: I hope to visit Glasgow soon in my capacity as Minister for Local Government, and will naturally be happy to meet the City Council.

Crime and Punishment (Scotland) Act 1997

Mr. Wallace: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what parts of the Crime and Punishment (Scotland) Act 1997 he intends to implement; and when he intends to lay the necessary orders. [85]

Mr. Dewar [holding answer 19 May 1997]: Sections 45 and 46 of the Crime and Punishment (Scotland) Act 1997 came into force on Royal Assent (21 March 1997). We are considering whether and when to implement the remaining provisions, and will announce our decisions in due course.

Local Authority House Sales Receipts

Mr. Wallace: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what proportion of capital receipts from the sale of local authority houses in Scotland he will require to be applied towards the reduction of local authority housing debt; and if he will make a statement. [86]

Mr. Dewar [holding answer 19 May 1997]: Scottish local authorities are required to set aside 75 per cent. of their receipts from house sales in order to reduce debt levels. We are reviewing that requirement and will announce our conclusion in due course.

Arable Area Payments Scheme

Mr. Tipping: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many payments were made and what was the total amount paid under the arable area payments scheme in 1996-97. [126]

Mr. Chisholm [holding answer 19 May 1997]: During 1996-97 the Scottish Office Agriculture, Environment and Fisheries Department dealt with 9,532 claims under the Arable Area Payments Scheme and the total amount paid was £146,685,005.

NATIONAL HERITAGE

Elgin Marbles

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what plans he has to discuss the Elgin Marbles with the Greek authorities. [259]

Mr. Fisher: I have no plans to discuss the Parthenon Sculptures with the Greek government.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

ENVIRONMENT AND THE REGIONS

Council Housing

Mr. John Cryer: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is his timetable for the release of capital receipts from the sale of council houses for the building of new homes. [173]

Mr. Raynsford: Legislation to facilitate the Government's Capital Receipts initiative will be brought forward as quickly as possible.

Rented Housing (New Build)

Mr. Bennett: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what estimate he has made of the number of houses which will be built for rent in England in the next 12 months. [34]

Mr. Raynsford: On current expenditure plans the Department estimates that around 26,000 new build housing association homes for rent will be completed in 1997-98 and a further 500 by local authorities. In addition, around 9,000 homes for rent will be provided by the purchase and rehabilitation of existing houses by housing associations.

London Docklands

Mr. Berry: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what was the sale price of the heritage river site recently sold by the London Docklands development corporation. [626]

Ms Angela Eagle: The sale price is commercial in confidence and the use likely to be allowable for the site under Tower Hamlets' development plan and following the planning inquiry held last year. The sale was announced by the LDDC on 12 May as "unconditional" which means solely that it was a straight sale without restrictive covenants. The new owners cannot build what they like on the land and they must gain approval for any development through the normal planning process. The planning authority for the Hermitage Riverside site is Tower Hamlets.

Global Temperatures

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions from what sources his Department evaluates information concerning global temperature changes. [516]

Ms Angela Eagle: Information concerning global temperature changes is compiled from observations made at more than 1,000 land meteorological stations and a similar number of ships and buoys around the world. Analysis of the data is undertaken by the UK Met Office, in conjunction with the Climatic Research Unit of the University of East Anglia.

Rented Housing (London)

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is his

estimate of the average rent levels in London for (a) council, (b) housing association and (c) private rented accommodation at the latest available date. [170]

Mr. Raynsford: Latest figures of average weekly rents before deduction of Housing Benefit in London are:

	£	Date
Council	52.72	30 April 1996
Housing association	50.28	31 March 1996
Private	114.00	April 1995 to March 1996

The council and housing association rents are from administrative returns. The private rent is from the 1995-96 Survey of English Housing and, like all estimates from sample surveys, is subject to sampling variability.

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to provide opportunities for local authorities in London to build houses for rent. [169]

Mr. Raynsford: We will ensure that any resources released under the capital receipts initiative will be made available to local authorities to use in support of priority schemes which meet key objectives. We will be considering and consulting on these over the coming weeks.

Local Agenda 21 Initiatives

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is the total expenditure in 1996-97 on Local Agenda 21 initiatives; what is his estimate for 1997-98; and if he will make a statement. [503]

Ms Angela Eagle: The Government do not require local authorities, or other interested sectors, to provide returns detailing Local Agenda 21 expenditure. There would be considerable methodological difficulties in trying to identify such expenditure because sustainable development is essentially about carrying out existing functions, including planning and economic development, in ways that are environmentally sustainable.

The Government's support for Local Agenda 21 includes modest funding for the co-ordinating and promotional work of the Local Government Management Board. But the bulk of Government funding for local authorities and others for projects in line with Local Agenda 21 principles is associated with other mechanisms such as regeneration programmes or the Environmental Action Fund.

The Government are determined to work in partnership with all sectors of society in pursuit of sustainable development. Local Agenda 21 initiatives, involving local authorities, business, the voluntary and community sectors, have a vital contribution to make. The UK is generally acknowledged to be one of the leaders in the field, with 70 per cent. of its local authorities committed to Local Agenda 21, and it is to be hoped that next month's UN Special Session will encourage other countries to make similar progress.

Smoking

Mr. MacShane: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps he is taking to discourage smoking in public places. [438]

Ms Angela Eagle: The Government intend to call a seminar of experts in the field of smoking reduction. The results of this seminar will inform policy, which will then be set out in a White Paper on our strategy to reduce smoking. We will also be drafting legislation to ban tobacco advertising. The Department of the Environment, which has responsibility for policy on smoking in public places, will continue to encourage those responsible for the management of public places to introduce smoking policies, against the targets set out in the 1997 White Paper "This Common Inheritance", and will be reviewing further steps that might be taken to speed up progress.

City Challenge (Leicester)

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he plans next to visit Leicester's City Challenge. [799]

Ms Angela Eagle: Ministers have no plans, as yet to visit the City Challenge area in Leicester. However, the regeneration of our towns and cities, especially those with severe problems, is a key Government objective. Therefore, when opportunities arise in the future, Ministers will be keen to visit important regeneration programmes, like the Leicester City Challenge.

Housing Finance (London)

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is his estimate for each London borough of money available from capital receipts to finance a housing programme. [171]

Mr. Raynsford: Local authorities already have usable capital receipts which are available for any capital purpose (including housing). The amounts of these receipts, for each London Authority, are set out in the table.

In addition, however, we will be consulting the Local Government Association, the Association of London Government and local authorities on the Government's Capital Receipts initiative. No decision about the basis on which resources are to be distributed to individual authorities will be made until that consultation process is complete.

Accumulated usable capital receipts held at 31 March 1996

	£000
Barking and Dagenham	51,956
Barnet	17,299
Bexley	6,861
Brent	2,506
Bromley	0
Camden	215
City of London	76,685
Croydon	1,338
Ealing	129
Enfield	7,272
Greenwich	3,553
Hackney	0
Hammersmith and Fulham	0
Haringey	4
Harrow	14,066

Accumulated usable capital receipts held at 31 March 1996

	£000
Havering	13,956
Hillingdon	16,869
Hounslow	450
Islington	55
Kensington and Chelsea	0
Kingston upon Thames	365
Lambeth	550
Lewisham	814
Merton	0
Newham	82
Redbridge	5,068
Richmond upon Thames	9,825
Southwark	0
Sutton	1,066
Tower Hamlets	0
Waltham Forest	3,041
Wandsworth	10,365
Westminster	12,937
Total	257,327

Source:

1995-96 capital outturn returns.

TRANSPORT**Traffic Speeds (London)**

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is his estimate of average traffic speeds in central London. [176]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The latest estimates of average traffic speeds in central London, based on a speed survey carried out in May/June 1994, are just under 11 mph, with little variation between peak and daytime off-peak periods.

Bletchley to Bicester Railway Line

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to review proposals for the re-opening of passenger and freight services on the Bletchley to Bicester railway line. [177]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The East-West Rail Consortium, which is considering the possible re-opening of an East-West rail link north of London, has recently received a Phase II feasibility report. It is too early to say whether the work in hand will result in a viable proposal which the Government would be able to support.

Fishing Vessels (Safety)

Mr. Salmond: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) how many fishermen on UK-registered flag of convenience fishing vessels have satisfied the conditions laid down in the Fishing Vessels (Safety Training) Regulations 1989; what steps can be taken to prevent those who do not comply with this regulation from fishing on UK-registered vessels; and if he will make a statement; [748]

(2) what steps are being taken to ensure flag of convenience fishing vessels fishing against the UK quota are complying with UK safety regulations; and if he will make a statement. [749]

Ms Glenda Jackson: I have asked the Chief Executive of the Marine Safety Agency to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from R. M. Bradley to Mr. Alex Salmond, dated 20 May 1997:

The Secretary of State for Transport has asked me to reply to your Question, transferred from the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, about the safety training of crew working on UK registered fishing vessels and to your Question, transferred from the Secretary of State for Scotland, about fishing vessel compliance with safety regulations.

The onus for complying with the Fishing Vessels (Safety Training) Regulations 1989 rests on the individuals concerned and on the skippers and owners of their vessels. We do not hold data on which crew members meet the requirements and which do not (those crew members born before 1 March 1954 do not need to meet the requirements) but we have asked the Seafish Industry Authority for advice on the information held in their database about fishermen who have undergone safety training.

The Marine Safety Agency monitors compliance with all fishing vessel safety regulations by means of inspections of the vessels. If such an inspection finds non-compliance the vessel may be detained and the owner and the skipper can be prosecuted. In the particular case of safety training regulations, if any of the crew members do not comply, the owner of the vessel, the skipper and the individuals concerned can be prosecuted.

A12 (Capel St. Mary)

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what funds he will make available to Suffolk county council for the construction of the Old London road link road at Capel St. Mary on the A12. [654]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Pound Lane Cap Closure and Old London Road scheme on the A12 trunk road at Capel St. Mary is being promoted and entirely funded by the Highways Agency. No funds will be made available to Suffolk County Council.

Channel Tunnel (Safety)

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what action he proposes to take to ensure that Eurotunnel implements all the recommendations in the Channel Tunnel Safety Authority report before re-starting freight services. [5]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Government's concerns about the Channel Tunnel Safety Authority report have been put to the Channel Tunnel Intergovernmental Commission (IGC) by the UK delegation. As a result the IGC has requested from Eurotunnel a detailed timetable of its programme for meeting the Safety Authority recommendations for consideration by the IGC at its next meeting on 22 May 1997.

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if the technical difficulties with the crossover doors in the channel tunnel have been resolved; and if he will make a statement. [7]

Ms Jackson: Since the incident of the 18 November 1996, the undersea crossover doors have been subject to an enhanced testing and maintenance regime by Eurotunnel, which will continue. This has achieved a much higher level of reliability than previously obtained. The test reports are regularly examined by the Channel

Tunnel Safety Authority whose inspectors also inspect and report on maintenance and testing as part of their normal on-going duties.

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if the Channel Tunnel Safety Authority has estimated the cost to Eurotunnel of implementing the recommendations in its recent report into the channel tunnel fire. [56]

Ms Jackson: The Channel Tunnel Safety Authority made its recommendations on safety grounds and did not estimate any costs for implementation.

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what action the Channel Tunnel Safety Authority has taken to ensure that Eurotunnel had full safety training and audits in place for its staff. [59]

Ms Jackson: Safety training is one of the key elements identified by the Safety Authority in Eurotunnel's proposals for the restart of HGV shuttle services. The Safety Authority will carefully examine Eurotunnel's reports on their certification of staff trained in new procedures, including the report of an independent assessor, before making any recommendation to the Intergovernmental Commission.

More generally, the Channel Tunnel Safety Authority and its specialist working groups meet regularly with Eurotunnel to review the safe operation of the Channel Tunnel. The Safety Authority also has 22 safety inspectors available from national authorities who conduct regular safety inspections and check the performance of Eurotunnel's Safety Directorate.

Rail Employees (Travel Passes)

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will reinstate the travel passes withdrawn from those employees of the BREL who were made redundant; and if he will make a statement on the provision of travel passes to employees and past employees in the privatised railway. [32]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Travel concessions for ex-BREL staff are a matter for ADtranz (ABB Daimler Benz Transportation Ltd.).

In privatisation resulting from the Railways Act 1993, travel entitlements for staff in post prior to 31 March 1996 were contained in contracts of employment which transferred to the new employers under the Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations 1981. Travel concessions for staff taken on by these employers after 31 March 1996 are a matter for the employer. Travel concessions for railways staffing privatisation before this Act were separately negotiated for each sale.

Freight Train Derailments

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the number of freight train derailments in each of the last 12 months, listing the date and location of each one. [62]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Provisional figures reported to the Health and Safety Executive's Railway Inspectorate show that for the latest available 12 month period covering 1 April 1996 to 31 March 1997, there have been 80 freight train derailments on the national railway network. These derailments are listed by date and location as follows:

Date	Location
6 April 1996	Hinckley
8 April 1996	Stewarts Lane
16 April 1996	Hampstead Heath Tnl
9 May 1996	Melton Mowbray
18 May 1996	Smethick West
21 May 1996	Calder Bridge
29 May 1996	Swansea Landore
2 June 1996	Dundee Central Jct
4 June 1996	Tilbury Riverside
12 June 1996	Nottingham Station
13 June 1996	Hillhouse Quarry
16 June 1996	Chaddesden Sidings
17 June 1996	Par
18 June 1996	Immingham Receptn
20 June 1996	Dagenham
22 June 1996	Bletchley Yard
27 June 1996	Crave Street Jct
29 June 1996	Derby North
11 July 1996	Highworth Branch
13 July 1996	Millerhill Yard
20 July 1996	Motherwell Station
24 July 1996	Stewarts Lane
19 August 1996	Luton Linbury
23 August 1996	Gravesend
1 September 1996	Bletchley
4 September 1996	Lee Spur
5 September 1996	Niddrie South Jct
11 September 1996	Brent
14 September 1996	Staplehurst
24 September 1996	Great Coates
30 September 1996	Park Lane Jct
30 September 1996	Turners Lane Jct
30 September 1996	Wakefield, Kirkgate
6 October 1996	Wrawby Jct
7 October 1996	Westbury
7 October 1996	Tamworth TVHL
11 October 1996	Inverness
12 October 1996	Preston Parcel Dept
25 October 1996	Toton
26 October 1996	Hexam
5 November 1996	Westbury
6 November 1996	Meadow Sidings
18 November 1996	Swindon
23 November 1996	Wolverton
27 November 1996	Shoeburyness
27 November 1996	Miskin Loop
28 November 1996	Bletchley
30 November 1996	Grindelford
30 November 1996	Toton
1 December 1996	Gresty Lane, Crewe
7 December 1996	Scunthorpe
14 December 1996	Neville Hill
16 December 1996	Slade Hooton
2 January 1997	Gidea Park
7 January 1997	Woking
7 January 1997	Scunthorpe
10 January 1997	Langley Mill
22 January 1997	Mossend
24 January 1997	Charing/Hothfield
2 February 1997	Dalmur Park Jct
3 February 1997	Ascott-Und-Wychwd

Date	Location
4 February 1997	Bexley
4 February 1997	Coventry North Yard
5 February 1997	Gidea Park
7 February 1997	Hessle Road
10 February 1997	Townhill Jct
12 February 1997	Swindon-Austin Rd
16 February 1997	Nuneaton
20 February 1997	Crugwallins
22 February 1997	Toton Dow (H Level)
24 February 1997	Tees Yard
26 February 1997	Pyewood Road
27 February 1997	Carnforth
1 March 1997	Holyhead
5 March 1997	Colchester
6 March 1997	Workington (No. 3)
6 March 1997	Gidea Park
13 March 1997	St. Helens Central
20 March 1997	Park Jct
26 March 1997	Derby

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the number of freight train derailments in the 12 months (a) preceding and (b) following rail privatisation. [63]

Ms Jackson: The rail privatisation process has occurred in stages since 1 April 1994. Statistics for freight train derailments are compiled by the Health and Safety Executive on an annual basis and the following table gives the figures for the preceding and subsequent years.

Year	Number of freight train derailments
1993-94	78
1994-95	105
1995-96	74
1996-97 ¹	80

¹ Provisional.

Bus Employees Superannuation Trust

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a reassessment of the case of Mr. Francis Wheeler in respect of his claim for compensation for the loss of pension fund assets from the Bus Employees Superannuation Trust; and if he will make a statement on the Bus Employees Superannuation Trust. [29]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The present position is that the trustees of the Bus Employees Superannuation Trust have accepted the then Secretary of State for Transport's offer to meet their costs in pursuing through the Courts recovery of the surplus of the fund paid to my Department in 1990. My Department awaits the trustees' formal statement of claim. I am still studying the legal and other background to this case.

A5 (Nesscliff Bypass)

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on progress in respect of the A5 bypass for Nesscliff village, Shrewsbury. [76]

Ms Glenda Jackson [holding answer 19 May 1997]: The A5 Nesscliffe bypass was withdrawn from the national trunk road programme on 26 November 1996. As a result, all preparation work on the scheme ceased.

HEALTH

North Essex Health Authority

19. Mr. Bernard Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to ensure that North Essex health authority will receive its full share of NHS expenditure under the formula known as capitation funding. [422]

Mr. Milburn: The first step will be to look again at what the share of funds for North Essex health authority should be. We will look at how resources are distributed across both secondary and primary care, to ensure that these fully reflect local population needs and operate as fairly as possible.

Barnet General Hospital

20. Sir Sydney Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement about the construction of phase 1B at Barnet general hospital. [423]

Mr. Milburn: The phase 1B development of Barnet general hospital will go ahead as planned.

Dartford Hospital

21. Dr. Stoa: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the proposed hospital for Dartford under the PFI scheme. [424]

Mr. Milburn: The trust and their private sector partner have signed a commercial contract for the provision of a new district general hospital. The NHS (Private Finance) Bill to clarify existing powers to trusts to enter into PFI agreements will provide the private sector partner with the reassurance it has been seeking to enter into a PFI contract and it is expected that this scheme will now progress rapidly to financial close, with work on site starting very shortly afterwards.

GP Fundholding

22. Mr. Lansley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he intends to abolish general practitioner fundholding. [425]

24. Mr. Baldry: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the future of general practitioner fundholding. [427]

Mr. Milburn: I refer the hon. Members to the reply my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State gave earlier today.

NHS Resource Allocations

23. **Mr. Timms:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what proposals he has to reform the allocation of funds in the health service. [426]

Mr. Milburn: We will look at how resources are distributed across both secondary and primary care, to ensure that these fully reflect local population needs and operate as fairly as possible.

New Hospital Provision (South Worcestershire)

25. **Mr. Luff:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on his plans for new hospital provision in south Worcestershire. [428]

Mr. Milburn: Worcester Royal Infirmary NHS trust is currently negotiating with its preferred private sector partner prior to submitting the full business case for the proposed private finance scheme.

Waiting Lists

26. **Mr. Barnes:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement regarding his Department's policy on reducing the length of patient waiting lists. [429]

Mr. Milburn: We will reduce the bureaucratic costs of the NHS and the savings achieved will be used to improve direct patient care by treating more NHS patients. Our commitment is to end waiting times for cancer surgery and in particular to speed up the diagnosis and treatment for patients with breast cancer.

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is his Department's estimate of waiting times for elective surgery in each London health district for the latest available date. [515]

Ms Jowell: Waiting time information collected centrally does not identify separately those patients waiting for surgery. Figures are at specialty level and include all patients waiting for admission to hospital, whether it be for operations, medical treatment, assessment, therapy or rehabilitation.

The latest information on patients waiting for elective admission by individual health authority is published in "Hospital Waiting List Statistics: England (Resident Based) at 31 December 1996", copies of which are available in the Library.

Public Health

27. **Mr. Martyn Jones:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what will be the main policy priorities of the Minister responsible for public health over the next year; and if he will make a statement. [430]

Ms Jowell: I shall be working to carry forward the commitments made in the manifesto, to attack the root causes of ill health. I shall set new goals for improving the people's health which recognise the impact that poverty, poor housing, unemployment and a polluted environment have on health. I plan to outline the new public health strategy in early July.

Our clear commitment to public health issues has already been signalled in the Gracious Speech with the announcement that we shall be publishing later this year

a White Paper on ways of reducing death and illness caused by smoking and a draft Bill to ban tobacco advertising. In the summer we shall be holding a summit on tobacco and smoking.

I shall be working closely with colleagues in other Departments to take forward our commitments on food safety and use of lottery funds for health projects.

NHS Pay

28. **Mr. Waterson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what representations he has received about pay levels in the NHS. [431]

Mr. Milburn: We have received a number of representations about pay in the national health service.

NHS Spending

29. **Mrs. Ann Winterton:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on current levels of NHS spending. [432]

Mr. Milburn: National health service total gross spending in England in 1997-98 is estimated to be £36 billion.

Purchasing Authorities and Providers

30. **Mr. Andrew Rowe:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will carry out an urgent review of the record of purchasing authorities in settling accounts with their providers within the NHS. [433]

Mr. Milburn: We have no plans at present for undertaking a review of purchasing authorities' records in settling accounts with their providers within the NHS. We do, however, intend to cut down the current paperchase and release resources currently wasted on bureaucracy for patient care.

Oldchurch Hospital, Romford

31. **Mr. John Cryer:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement about the future of Oldchurch hospital in Romford. [434]

Mr. Milburn: The announcement we shall be making shortly about the London review will include reference to specific hospitals.

NHS Staff (Redundancies)

32. **Mr. Yeo:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of the number of NHS staff who will be made redundant as a result of his proposals to streamline management. [435]

Mr. Milburn: We are continuing discussions with officials and the national health service on how best to meet our manifesto commitments.

Assisted Conception

33. **Mr. Key:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will review the policy guidance he issues to health authorities and NHS trusts on assisted conception. [436]

Ms Jowell: Two documents providing advice on fertility, including assisted conception, are available to the NHS, "Effective Health Care Bulletin on the Management

of Subfertility", published by the National Health Service Centre for Reviews and Dissemination (1992); and "Infertility: Guidelines for Practice" published by the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists (1992). Both documents are currently being reviewed and updated advice should be available later this year.

In addition, the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority issues a code of practice to those clinics licensed under the terms of the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 1990. A revised code of practice is currently being prepared.

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if it is his policy that assisted conception including in vitro fertilisation should be available free and universally in the national health service. [91]

Ms Jowell: We are reviewing our policy in this area, in the context of the wider issue of variations in health service provision.

New Hospital (Peterborough)

34. Mrs. Brinton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he expects to make a decision on the building of a new hospital for Peterborough. [437]

Mr. Milburn: Peterborough Hospitals National Health Service trust has selected its preferred private sector partner and is working towards the submission of the full business case for the redevelopment of the Edith Cavell site under the private finance initiative.

Hospital Trust Decisions (Review)

35. Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what measures he proposes to review the decisions of hospital trusts to (a) close hospitals and (b) dispose of hospital lands. [439]

Mr. Milburn: We shall be considering the current arrangements for consultation on major services changes in due course. There are no plans to change the current arrangements for disposal of hospital land.

Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease

36. Mr. Illsley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if his Department intends to continue to appeal against the judgment of the Court of Appeal in favour of those victims of Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease caused through the use of human growth hormone; and if he will make a statement. [440]

Ms Jowell: The appeal is by the plaintiffs and not by the Department.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what projections he has evaluated in respect of the number of new variant CJD cases over the next two years. [294]

Ms Jowell: It will be three or four years before we have enough information about new variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease to make any reliable prediction of future numbers of cases.

Long-term Care

37. Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what proposals he has for the provision of long-term care; and if he will make a statement. [441]

Mr. Boateng: The Government intend to examine in detail, as heralded in our manifesto, provisions for long-term care of the elderly. We will make a further statement on this once the form of that examination and its content have been settled.

Private Finance Initiative

38. Mr. Ronnie Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the PFI in relation to the health service. [442]

Mr. Milburn: Our manifesto emphasised the crucial part we expect public/private partnerships to play in our spending plans. Our policy is to improve the private finance initiative in the national health service by taking forward the proposals set out in our 12-point plan in our business manifesto and we have already introduced the NHS (Private Finance) Bill which aims to ensure that NHS trusts have the statutory power to enter into PFI contracts. This will provide the private sector with the reassurance it needs to enter into PFI contracts and enable the major whole-hospital PFI schemes which have already signed commercial contracts to proceed to financial close.

39. Mr. Butterfill: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to involve the private sector in the provision of NHS services to the public. [443]

Mr. Milburn: The Government's priority is to develop the national health service as a public service meeting the needs of its patients. We view the role of the private sector in the provision of NHS services in that light. We have already introduced a Bill that removes any shadow of doubt regarding NHS trusts' powers to enter into private finance initiative-type contracts.

Accident and Emergency Services (North London)

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to review accident and emergency provision in hospitals in north London. [412]

Mr. Dobson: As my hon. Friend knows, before the election we gave an undertaking to review health care in London to ensure that it will meet the needs of Londoners. Details of that review will be announced shortly. It will of course cover accident and emergency services.

Arnold Lodge Secure Unit, Leicester

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what proposals he has regarding Arnold Lodge secure unit, Leicester; what plans he has to visit the unit; and what representations he has received relating to the unit. [271]

Mr. Boateng: The key proposals for the future of Arnold Lodge medium secure unit, Leicester, are contained within the action plan arising from the full independent review of the facility recently undertaken. The plans will improve the quality of the environment and provision of care. It will be a matter for purchasers of the service in conjunction with Leicestershire Mental Health Services national health service trust to determine the future of the service.

At present, we have no plans to visit the unit and have received no representations.

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps he proposes to take in respect of recommendations contained in his Department's report on Arnold Lodge secure unit, Leicester; and what is the timetable for their implementation. [274]

Mr. Boateng: As a result of the full independent review of Arnold Lodge medium secure unit, Leicester, an action plan has now been submitted to Leicestershire health authority which contains over 100 recommendations.

The recommendations fall into 12 key areas ranging from security, risk management, policy and practice. The majority of these recommendations are to be implemented by the end of June 1997. A new management team has been established which has prioritised and actioned the most immediate issues. Furthermore, a capital sum of £0.5 million has been identified by the NHS executive Trent for a package of security measures. These will be implemented over the next few months.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary for Health will oversee the process through the regional office which manages the performance of Leicestershire health authority and monitors the performance of the Leicestershire Mental Health Services NHS trust.

Mental Health Secure Units

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many regional mental health secure units there are; and how many staff they employ. [273]

Mr. Boateng: There are 34 medium secure units nationally providing a total of 1,509 medium secure places. The number of staff employed in medium secure units is not collected centrally.

Psychiatric and Geriatric Care

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the costs to the NHS of geriatric and psychiatric patients being moved to alternative accommodation from the reduction in the average length of stay of patients in psychiatric and geriatric provision in Cumbria. [25]

Mr. Boateng: It is the responsibility of each health authority to determine the pattern of provision of health services for its local population in the light of local needs and the availability of resources.

Dental Access Fund

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will review the operation of the dental access fund. [262]

Mr. Milburn: Yes.

NHS Trusts (London)

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is his estimate of the 1996-97 deficit for each London NHS trust; and what is his estimate for the current financial year. [512]

Mr. Milburn: The information requested for 1996-97 on all London trusts is shown in the table. Plans for 1997-98 are still being agreed.

1996-97 quarter 4 forecast surpluses and deficits of London trusts

Trust name	1996-97 £ 000
Barnet Community Healthcare	791
BHB Community Health Care	431
Bromley Hospitals	-518
Camden and Islington Community Health Services	138
Central Middlesex Hospital	-2,920
Chase Farm Hospitals	33
Chelsea and Westminster Healthcare	0
City and Hackney Community Services	0
Croydon Community	36
Ealing Hospital	502
Enfield Community Care	40
Forest Healthcare	-4,418
Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children	840
Greenwich Healthcare	25
Guy's and St. Thomas'	4,700
Hammersmith Hospitals	43
Harefield Hospital	204
Haringey Health Care	314
Harrow and Hillingdon Healthcare	-1,072
Havering Hospitals	59
Hillingdon Hospital	-1,569
Homerton Hospital	589
Hounslow and Spelthorne Community and Mental Health	134
King's Healthcare	200
Kingston and District Community	1,460
Kingston Hospital	313
Lambeth Healthcare	693
Lewisham and Guy's Mental Health	151
Lewisham Hospital	-2,866
Lifecare	3,076
London Ambulance Service	0
Mayday Healthcare	-903
Merton and Sutton Community	465
Moorfields Eye Hospital	273
Mount Vernon and Watford Hospitals	-2,232
Newham Community Health Services	264
Newham Healthcare	-713
North Middlesex Hospital	7
North West London Mental Health	2,322
Northwick Park and St. Mark's	-3,969
Optimum Health Services	108
Oxleas	285
Parkside	471
Pathfinder	115
Queen Mary's Sidcup	50
Ravensbourne Priority Health	333
Redbridge Health Care	557
Richmond, Twickenham and Roehampton Healthcare	-506
Riverside Community Health Care	239
Riverside Mental Health	681
Royal Brompton Hospital	369
Royal Free Hampstead	484
Royal Hospital of St. Bartholomew, the Royal London Hospital and London Chest Hospital	-4,744
Royal London Homoeopathic Hospital	-54
Royal Marsden	1,637
Royal National Orthopaedic Hospital	801
St. George's Healthcare	578
St. Mary's	-945
Tavistock and Portman	71
Teddington Memorial Hospital	22
The Bethlem and Maudsley	606
The St. Helier	833
Tower Hamlets Healthcare	0
University College London Hospitals	-2,246
Wandsworth Community Health	92

1996-97 quarter 4 forecast surpluses and deficits of London trusts

Trust name	1996-97 £ 000
Wellhouse	-400
West London Healthcare	1,213
West Middlesex University Hospital	-1,796
Whittington Hospital	-374

Children (Employment)

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is his Department's estimate of the number of children (a) legally and (b) illegally employed in Britain; and if he will make a statement. [514]

Mr. Boateng: The information requested is not collected centrally.

Health Authority Funding

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what criteria are used by his Department when allocating funds to district health authorities. [502]

Mr. Milburn: The objective of resource allocation is to promote equity through the use of a capitation formula which weights the population for the effects of:

- age-related need
- additional need
- geographical costs

We will look at how resources are distributed across both secondary and primary care to ensure that these fully reflect local population needs and operate as fairly as possible.

Camden and Islington Health Authority

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what has been the total payment by his Department to Camden and Islington health authority for each of the last five years; what is his estimate for 1997-98; and what estimate the authority has submitted to him of its need. [511]

Mr. Milburn: The total payments to Camden and Islington health authority for the years 1992-93 to 1997-98 are shown in the table. Health authorities' cash limited revenue allocations are informed by the national weighted capitation formula, not by their own estimates of need. The non-cash-limited funding is demand led.

Year	Health authority	Cash limited payments (£)	Non cash limited payments (£)	Total payments (£)
1992-93	Camden and Islington District Health Authority	271,803,000	Nil	271,803,000
	Camden and Islington Family Health Services Authority	8,972,700	38,218,067	47,190,767
1993-94	Camden and Islington District Health Authority	256,376,200	Nil	256,376,200
	Camden and Islington Family Health Services Authority	11,668,100	41,702,631	53,370,731
1994-95	Camden and Islington District Health Authority	255,803,600	Nil	255,803,600
	Camden and Islington Family Health Services Authority	14,295,000	44,304,051	58,599,051
1995-96	Camden and Islington District Health Authority	270,168,000	Nil	270,168,000
	Camden and Islington Family Health Services Authority	17,369,000	47,639,671	65,008,671
1996-97	Camden and Islington Health Authority	295,839,000	52,925,429	348,764,429
1997-98	Camden and Islington Health Authority (based on initial cash limits only)	276,612,000	—	276,612,000

Written Answers to Questions

Wednesday 21 May 1997

SCOTLAND

Residential Care Report

Dr. Godman: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what plans he has to implement the recommendations contained in the report of the Working Group on Residential Care Home Registration Procedures; and if he will make a statement. [129]

Mr. Galbraith: We will be consulting this month on draft guidance to local authorities on a wide range of measures recommended in the Working Group's report. A Bill on the regulation and inspection of residential and domiciliary care will be introduced at a suitable opportunity.

Mental Illness Grant

Dr. Godman: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will list the cost to public funds of the mental illness specific grant in each of the last seven years; what sums have been allocated for (a) 1997-98 and (b) 1998-99; and if he will make a statement. [117]

Mr. Galbraith: Expenditure on projects supported by the mental illness specific grant in each year since 1990-91 has been £0, £2.3 million, £5.7 million, £9.9 million, £14.0 million, £18.0 million and £18.0 million. The allowance for 1997-98 is £18.0 million. The allowances for community-based services for people with mental health problems in 1998-99 will be considered along with other elements of the local government settlement. The grant has been the subject of a Scottish Office review and an independent evaluation which will be published later this year.

Prison Service

Mr. Doran: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how he proposes to reply to questions about the Scottish Prison Service. [1068]

Mr. Dewar: In view of the special sensitivity of prison matters, I have decided that all Questions about the Scottish Prison Service will be answered by a Scottish Office Minister and not by the Chief Executive of the Service. This is no reflection whatever on the Chief Executive who has discharged well his responsibilities in this regard, nor does it have any implication for the Scottish Prison Service as an Agency; but it recognises particular concerns that Ministers should answer personally on matters relating to imprisonment.

DEFENCE

Salisbury Plain (Water Plants)

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many invitations to tender were issued, and to whom, in respect of maintenance of water treatment plants on or near Salisbury Plain during 1996, listing the establishments; and which contractors were successful. [97]

Mr. Spellar: The Army's water and sewage treatment plants on or near Salisbury Plain are managed from the five military stations at Upavon, Larkhill, Warminster, Netheravon and Tidworth. All are maintained in accordance with our normal practice of appointing a Works Service Manager from the commercial sector whose responsibility it is to maintain the estate and to issue invitations to tender for the work involved. The Works Service Manager contract in respect of the plants managed from Tidworth was reviewed in 1996. The contract was awarded to BP Defence following competition in which the following firms were also invited to tender: Serco, Laings, Trant, Amey and Trafalgar House. Invitations were also issued in 1996 to companies interested in making proposals for the provision of water and sewage treatment at Tidworth under a Private Finance Initiative exercise.

Pensions (Service Men's Widows)

Mr. Letwin: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what are the pension entitlements of widows of service men (a) who retired before March 1973 and (b) who retired after that date; what effect remarriage of a widow under either of these circumstances has upon that widow's entitlement; and if she will make it her policy that such widows receive pensions equal to at least half of the pensions to which their husbands would have been entitled. [651]

Mr. Spellar: I am replying to this question as it concerns benefits payable to Service widows under the provisions of the Armed Forces Pension Scheme (AFPS).

Under the provisions, a widow of a Serviceman who retired before 31 March 1973 is entitled to a pension equal to one third of her late husband's pension. A Service widow whose husband retired on or after that date is entitled to a pension equal to one half of her husband's pension. On remarriage a Service widow's entitlement to an AFPS pension ceases. However, if the subsequent marriage should end, there is discretion to restore the original Forces Family Pension. 80 per cent. of such applications are successful. In the case of those widows whose husband's death is accepted as attributable to their military service the original Armed Forces pension is automatically restored.

One of the principles which underpin the way in which the major public service schemes operate is that improvements to the scheme should not be retrospective. An extension of widows' pensions to half rate would breach this principle. If improvements to pensions schemes were to include the cost of backdating, it would become very difficult for schemes to afford any worthwhile changes. The AFPS therefore operates on the principle that when Service personnel retire, they and their dependants are entitled only to the provisions of the pension scheme in force at the date of retirement.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Share Dealings (Lord Archer)

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if she will make available for public inspection her Department's inspectors report on Lord Archer's share dealings; and if she will make a statement. [277]

Mr. Nigel Griffiths: No. Reports of inspections under section 177 of the Financial Services Act 1986 are not published and are therefore prepared on that basis. The inspectors undertake their task with the knowledge that there is no power in the Act providing for publication and that they need not, therefore, be inhibited in expressing their views. Individuals who are criticised in a section 177 report are not given any opportunity to comment upon the criticisms, as would be the case if the report was to be published. Section 177 reports are prepared to enable the Secretary of State to consider further action including possible criminal proceedings.

Debt (Late Payment)

Mr. Baldry: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what research her Department has (a) commissioned and (b) evaluated on late payment of debt by companies. [69]

Mrs. Roche: My Department is aware of the continuing difficulties experienced by small businesses as a result of the late payment of commercial debts. Although this Department has not commissioned any research on this matter it has closely analysed the findings of other key pieces of research including the recent work undertaken by NOP which showed that 80 per cent. of British businesses wanted a statutory right to interest. These findings are supported by similar research undertaken by Lloyds Bank and Office World which show that the majority of small firms are in favour of legislation.

The Government is determined to change the payment culture in the UK and that is why we have responded to the calls from small businesses and announced in the Queen's Speech that we will introduce the Fair Payment of Commercial Debts Bill. The Government will consult on the most appropriate way of introducing legislation and plans to bring forward a Green Paper in the Summer to enable interested parties to put their views forward.

Minimum Wage

Mr. Baldry: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what research her Department has (a) commissioned and (b) evaluated on the impact on jobs of setting a minimum wage at different levels. [70]

Mr. Ian McCartney: The independent Low Pay Commission will recommend to Government the initial level at which the National Minimum Wage might be set according to the economic circumstances of the time.

Civil Servants (Ethnic Minorities)

Mr. Vaz: To ask the President of the Board of Trade how many civil servants, of each grade, in her Department, were of Asian origin, on 5 May. [732]

Mr. Nigel Griffiths: On 5 May 1997 the DTI employed, on headcount basis, 241 staff of Asian Origin in the following grade levels:

	Number
Grade 7 level and above	9
SEO—level	14
HEO—level	21
EO—level	66
AO—level	101
AA—level	30

The figures provided are on a headcount basis. They include staff in the DTI but exclude casual staff and staff in Executive Agencies. About 8 per cent. of staff have chosen not to respond to the Department's ethnic origin survey.

Mr. Vaz: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what proposals she has to increase the number of ethnic minority employees in her Department. [733]

Mr. Griffiths: My Department's recruitment procedures take full account of the need to attract ethnic minority applicants when posts are available. This includes the use of ethnic minority press to advertise vacancies; advertising in inner city job centres; race awareness training and guidance for those involved in recruitment activity; and detailed monitoring of recruitment campaigns.

However, the number of staff in the Department has reduced significantly in recent years, and there has been little recruitment at any level. When there is a need to recruit new staff, the Department will actively seek to attract applications from all sections of the community. It will also keep under review the effectiveness of the Department's recruitment procedures in this respect.

Bank of Credit and Commerce International

Mr. Vaz: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if she will commission a report into the liquidation of BCCI. [712]

Mr. Nigel Griffiths: My officials expect to receive the annual report of the liquidators as to the progress of the liquidation of BCCI shortly. It will cover the fifth year of the liquidation ie the 12 months to 14 January 1997 and will be made available to creditors. I undertake to send my hon. Friend a copy of that report and to place a copy in the Library of the House.

Mr. Vaz: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what plans she has to meet the liquidators of BCCI. [711]

Mr. Griffiths: I understand that my predecessor met my hon. Friend and others in November 1996 and met the joint liquidators of BCCI in December 1996. I do not have any present plans to meet the joint liquidators but would be grateful if my hon. Friend would write to me if there are any matters to do with the liquidation to which he particularly wishes to draw my attention.

Insolvency Service

Mr. Vaz: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what changes she plans to make to the Insolvency Service. [713]

Mr. Nigel Griffiths: I have no plans to make changes to the Insolvency Service but if there are any matters in relation to its operations to which my hon. Friend wishes to draw my attention I should be grateful to hear from him.

Businesses (Deregulation)

Mrs. Ann Winterton: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what plans she has to reduce regulatory burdens on businesses. [701]

Mrs. Roche: As we made clear in our manifesto, we are committed to relieving the regulatory burdens on businesses, particularly on small businesses. To achieve this we plan to work in partnership with business to cut red tape for small firms, ensure that new regulations are simple and fair, and establish simpler means by which businesses can undertake their dealings with Government.

Trade Fairs

Ms Angela Smith: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what future provision is being made for the support of trade fairs abroad. [1199]

Mr. Beckett: My officials will shortly be writing to potential sponsors inviting bids for trade fair and seminar support in 1998–99 under the Trade Fair and Seminar Support Schemes and with a view to announcing the successful ones later this year. Industry had told us that it believes a separate scheme is more effective than including trade fairs in a Challenge approach. In the light of these representations we have decided that support for trade fairs will not be included in any future round of the Sector Challenge. Together with industry we will be reviewing all forms of export assistance, including trade fairs, through the new Export Forum. These actions fulfil commitments made in our business manifesto to review the previous government's decision to change the arrangements for supporting British participation in trade fairs.

Price Marking Order

Mr. Baker: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what assessment she has made of the impact on (a) business and (b) small businesses of the Price Marking Order 1991; and if she will make a statement. [100]

Mr. Nigel Griffiths: A compliance cost assessment was prepared prior to the making of the Price Marking Order 1991.

Implementation of the new Price Indications Directive—currently at an advanced stage of negotiations—will require the making of a new Price Marking Order and the revocation of the 1991 Order. My Department will consult business organisations and others, and will prepare a new compliance cost assessment before the new Order is laid before Parliament.

Mersey Docks and Harbour Company

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what contact has been undertaken by her Department with the Mersey Docks and Harbour Company in respect of measures to reach an agreement with the dismissed employees. [513]

Mr. Ian McCartney [holding answer 20 May 1997]: My Department has had no contact with the Mersey Docks and Harbour Company concerning the resolution of this dispute. However, I understand the independent Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service has been in touch with the two sides to this dispute and remains ready to provide assistance if both sides agree.

NATIONAL HERITAGE

Television Licence Evasion

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage how many prosecutions for television licence evasion in the Preston TVLEO area took place in each year since 1992. [705]

Mr. Chris Smith: From 1993–94, the Preston Television Licensing Enquiry Office (TVLEO) area also included Morecambe. From December 1996, the Preston TVLEO area was incorporated into TV Licensing's Northern Region and prosecution figures for the Preston area are no longer separately recorded. The number of prosecutions for television licence evasion during the period in question was:

	Year	Number of prosecutions
Preston TVLEO	1992–93	4,990
Preston TVLEO (including Morecambe)	1993–94	6,571
Preston TVLEO (including Morecambe)	1994–95	5,505
Preston TVLEO (including Morecambe)	1995–96	5,169
Preston TVLEO (including Morecambe)	April to November 1996	3,726

Civil Service (Ethnic Minorities)

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what proposals he has to increase the number of employees from ethnic minorities within his Department. [240]

Mr. Tom Clarke: The Department has increased the complement of staff engaged in Equal Opportunities work from 1997–98 which will enable plans to be developed for improving the opportunities for employees from ethnic minorities. Current figures show that the percentage of ethnic minority employees in my Department is above the Civil Service average.

Sport

Mr. Gapes: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what plans he has to encourage more people to participate in sport. [388]

Mr. Banks: The Government will take the lead to extend opportunities for participation in sport through a national strategy for sport which will embrace all sections of the community regardless of where they live, social background, age or ability. This will be dedicated to providing excellence at all levels and improving sporting performance, while increasing sporting opportunities for the many not the few.

Minister of Sport

Mr. Hogg: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage if the statement made by the Minister of Sport that the support of Lord MacLaurin, former chairman of the United Kingdom Sports Council, for the Conservative Party was not a good career move, represents Government policy. [606]

Mr. Banks: My right hon. Friend has accepted Lord MacLaurin's resignation, which was tendered by him for his own reasons.

National Lottery

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what proportion of lottery grants has been made to (a) large and (b) small-scale projects. [804]

Mr. Chris Smith: The following table shows the proportion of lottery awards to date by value.

Award amount	Per cent. ¹
Under £50,000	54
£50,000–£99,999	20
£100,000–£499,999	21
£500,000–£1,000,000	2
£1 million+	3

¹ Rounded to the nearest per cent.

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what plans he has to increase the share of lottery proceeds distributed to the regions. [802]

Mr. Smith: It is clear that some areas of the country have benefited a great deal more from the Lottery than others. We will be looking at the reasons for this as part of our overall review of Lottery distribution and considering what changes might be made as a result.

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what proportion of lottery proceeds currently goes to ethnic minority projects; and what steps he is taking to ensure that ethnic minority projects are well represented and supported. [803]

Mr. Smith: Our best estimate suggests that over 3 per cent. of Lottery awards so far announced, representing around 2 per cent. of total value of awards have been to ethnic minority projects, though many other projects provide benefits for people from ethnic minorities. I am conducting a thorough review of the distribution of Lottery proceeds including how best to ensure that all sections of the community benefit fully from the National Lottery.

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage if he will make a statement on the mechanisms for the public accountability of the operation of the lottery. [807]

Mr. Smith: The operation of the National Lottery is regulated by the Director-General who is appointed by the Secretary of State for National Heritage under the National Lottery etc. Act 1993. The Director-General is head of the Office of the National Lottery (OFLOT) which is an independent, non-Ministerial Government Department. As its head, the Director-General is

accountable for the exercise of his statutory functions under the National Lottery etc. Act 1993, and for the financial operation of his Department.

The Director-General must report each year to me on the exercise of his functions. This report is then laid before Parliament. He is also accountable to Parliamentary committees. The Director-General must also provide me with information relating to the National Lottery, or a lottery forming part of it, as I may direct.

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage over what timetable he proposes to divert proceeds from the midweek lottery to health and education projects; and to which type of health and education projects he intends funds to be allocated. [805]

Mr. Smith: I intend to publish a White Paper in the summer setting out our plans for reforming the National Lottery and to introduce the National Lottery (Amendment) Bill before Christmas. The first priorities will be after-school clubs to provide homework centres and extra-curricular opportunities in the arts and culture; establishing a national network of one-stop healthy living centres promoting health and fitness; training teachers in the IT skills they need in the information age; and the establishment of the National Endowment for Science and the Arts. These programmes will begin as soon as the necessary legislation is in place.

Mr. Patrick Hall: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what plans he has to reform the distribution of the proceeds of the national lottery. [383]

Mr. Smith [*holding answer 19 May 1997*]: In addition to establishing new good causes to benefit from the National Lottery, we will review the existing distribution system to ensure that there is the widest possible access to Lottery funds throughout the UK. We will consider particularly the need for a proper strategy for the distribution of funds and co-ordination between the distributing bodies.

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what plans he has to limit the level of the national lottery operator's profits. [806]

Mr. Smith: I do not have the powers to restrict the level of profit which Camelot makes under its current licence. We will seek a competitive and efficient not-for-profit operator to run the National Lottery when Camelot's licence runs out so that the maximum amount of money possible goes to the good causes.

Globe Theatre Site

Sir Peter Lloyd: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what steps he plans to take to ensure that the fullest practicable archaeological investigation is made of the original Globe Theatre site. [605]

Mr. Banks: When the Globe's remains were discovered in 1989, part of the site was excavated and fully recorded. English Heritage is prepared to consider the case for further archaeological investigations beneath the basement of Anchor Terrace, provided it can be shown convincingly that there is a high probability of discovering valuable and particular information about the Globe as a result.

Royal Collection

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage when the computerised inventory of the Royal Collection will be completed. [702]

Mr. Fisher: I understand from the Royal Household, which is responsible for the Royal Collection Department, that they expect the inventory to be completed by the end of this year.

Millennium

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what plans his Department has to celebrate the Millennium. [369]

Mr. Chris Smith: My Department is responsible for co-ordinating the Government's interests in the Millennium. Through the Millennium Commission we will be spending nearly £1.8 billion of National Lottery money on projects—great and small—to mark the year 2000. My Department is also working with other organisations involved in the process of planning for the Millennium to ensure proper co-ordination.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Gibraltar

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans he has to discuss Gibraltar with his Spanish counterpart. [717]

Mr. Doug Henderson: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs will be meeting his Spanish counterpart on a number of occasions in the coming weeks. As well as EU issues, he will discuss a wide range of bilateral issues, including Gibraltar.

Arms Trafficking

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make it his policy to give support for the programme for preventing and combating illicit trafficking in conventional arms put forward by the Netherlands Government during their presidency of the EU. [621]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: Yes. We hope it will be possible for the programme to be adopted during the current EU Presidency, and will play a full part in taking it forward.

Dr. Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps he is taking to advance an EU code of conduct on the arms trade at the EU intergovernmental conference. [622]

Mr. Lloyd: We are committed to working for the introduction of an EU Code of Conduct on arms exports, setting out high common standards. Work is in hand on ways to implement this commitment, which we intend to discuss with our EU partners at an early stage.

South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the summit meeting of the South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation; and if he will make a statement. [746]

Mr. Fatchett: The South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation can play an important role in promoting trade liberalisation, stability and security within the region. The Summit in Male from 12 to 14 May saw a number of positive developments on these issues.

Arms Trade

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he next intends to visit the UN to discuss the supply of arms to third world regimes. [319]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary had no immediate plans for such a visit. As a major arms exporter, the UK will exercise its responsibility to ensure that the arms trade is properly regulated. We have made a number of commitments in this area. In particular, we will not permit the export of arms to regimes which might use them for internal repression or international aggression. We shall work for increased transparency on defence exports at the national and international level. We shall also work for the introduction of an EU code of conduct setting high common standards to govern arms exports from all EU countries, and for the strengthening of the UN Register on Conventional Arms.

Land Mines

Mrs. Helen Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what is the policy of Her Majesty's Government on the import, export, transfer, manufacture and use of anti-personnel land mines. [1067]

Mr. Robin Cook: As announced earlier today by my right hon. Friend we shall implement our manifesto commitment to ban the import, export, transfer and manufacture of all forms of anti-personnel land mines.

We will accelerate the phasing out of our stocks of anti-personnel land mines, and complete it by 2005 or when an effective international agreement to ban their use enters into force, whichever comes first. In the meantime, we have introduced a complete moratorium on their operational use, while we participate constructively in the Ottawa Process and push in the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva for a wider ban.

That moratorium will be suspended only if we judge that for a specific operation the security of our Armed Forces would be jeopardised without the possibility of the use of anti-personnel land mines. In such an exceptional case we would report to Parliament the decision, and the circumstances which led to it.

We shall also examine how we can make more progress in removing mines already laid across the world.

TREASURY

Unemployment (Humberside)

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is the number of households in (a) Hull and (b) Kingston upon Hull, North without a wage earner. [164]

Mrs. Liddell [holding answer 19 May 1997]: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the chief executive of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. Kevin McNamara, dated 21 May 1997:

The Chancellor of the Exchequer has asked me to reply as the Director of the Office for National Statistics to your recent question on the number of households in Hull and Kingston upon Hull North without a wage earner.

Estimates of non-pensioner households with no-one in employment are available from the Labour Force Survey (LFS) at national and regional level. They are also available for counties, except a few for which the numbers are not sufficiently reliable.

No information on households or families is available from the LFS below county level because the analyses would not be sufficiently reliable.

ATTORNEY-GENERAL

Prosecution Arrangements

Ms Blears: To ask the Attorney-General what plans he has for improving the effectiveness of prosecution arrangements. [1198]

The Attorney-General: The pledges we made in our manifesto and the paper "The Case for the Prosecution" published before the election envisaged a change to the organisational structure of the Crown Prosecution Service so that there would be a one-to-one relationship between a police force and its corresponding CPS area as equal partners. In addition, we undertook to establish a review under the auspices of a person of the calibre of a High Court Judge to examine more closely the internal structures of the CPS, together with its policies and procedures and in particular whether they have been a factor in the extent to which convictions have fallen—by more than a third—whilst crime has risen so dramatically in recent years.

Immediately on taking office I asked the Director of Public Prosecutions to work up proposals for dividing the Crown Prosecution Service into 42 areas each having its own Chief Crown Prosecutor ie. one for each police force outside London with the Metropolitan Police and City of London Police beings served by one CPS area. She has now done so. The basic timetable of the arrangements to be implemented is as follows:

1. By 1 June 1997:

DPP will have, as an interim measure, identified and named individuals to be known as the Crown Prosecutor for each of the proposed new CPS areas. The immediate role for those persons would be to assume oversight of the casework in the relevant area, together with the responsibility for local, consistent delivery of casework practices; and a personal involvement in serious or sensitive cases. He or she would also represent the CPS within the police force area and act

as principal point of contact for the Chief Constable having a general role in developing and influencing local relationships with other criminal justice agencies and the wider public.

2. The broader management and administrative arrangements within the CPS, apart from the casework and representational functions mentioned above, would remain unaltered for the time being.

3. By April 1998:

The DPP will formally vary the division of the CPS into the 42 new areas through a direction made under Section 1(5) of the Prosecution of Offences Act 1985.

Selection boards will have been held to appoint 42 Chief Crown Prosecutors for the areas.

The 42 Chief Crown Prosecutors will assume their full management responsibilities for areas. They will manage their areas within an agreed framework with responsibility for their budgets, but accountable ultimately to the DPP for the performance of the service in their areas.

The detail surrounding these arrangements will be informed by the proposed review of the CPS on which I will be making a further announcement shortly. I should add that we are firmly committed to the principle of an independent prosecution service within a coherent national framework: our aim is to build on and adapt the underlying strengths and real achievements of the CPS in the past 10 years, so that the Service is able to deliver its full potential.

DUCHY OF LANCASTER

Civil Servants

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster how many civil servants there are currently. [1045]

Dr. David Clark: At 1 January 1997 there were 482,770 permanent civil servants. There were also 23,450 casual staff. Information for 1 April will be available shortly.

WALES

Housing (Energy Efficiency)

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how he proposes to enable councils to modernise houses with defective windows and doors and install central heating; and if he will make a statement. [631]

Mr. Win Griffiths: We are taking forward the Manifesto commitments to a phased release of capital receipts for building new houses and rehabilitating old ones; to support effective schemes, involving partnership with the private sector and registered social landlords, and to deploy private finance to improve the public housing stock and to introduce greater diversity and choice.

Nursery Vouchers

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on the nursery voucher scheme. [633]

Mr. Hain: I announced on 12 May that nursery vouchers in Wales are to be abolished from the end of this term.

Young People

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how he proposes to move young people aged 24 years and under from benefits to work or training; and if he will make a statement. [635]

Mr. Hain: The Government's Welfare to Work proposals will ensure that no young person between the ages of 18 and 24 need be unemployed for longer than 6 months. We intend to offer these young people the choice of working and training with employers, voluntary or environmental organisations or participating in full time education or training. The Government is determined to break the vicious cycle of unemployment, frustration and alienation experienced by too many young people in Wales.

NHS Treatment Costs

Mr. Forth: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what is the average cost of NHS treatment per patient in Wales. [649]

Mr. Win Griffiths: The average cost of NHS treatment per patient for primary healthcare in Wales is not available centrally. For secondary healthcare the 1995-96 average cost per episode, for cases using a bed, is £1,053 in Wales.

Health Service Repairs and Maintenance

Mr. Opik: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what was the outstanding repair and maintenance backlog at NHS facilities by health authority in each of the last five years for which figures are available. [780]

Mr. Win Griffiths: Backlog Maintenance statistics were collated by Health Authority area until 31 March 1995 but following reorganisation are collected and presented on a Trust basis.

£ million				
Health authority (Including Trusts)	1992	1993	1994	1995
Clwyd	40.3	44.5	49.6	31
East Dyfed	25.4	18.9	14.6	17.0
Gwent	36.7	33.9	25.5	36.0
Gwynedd	12.6	16.3	16.2	8.0
Mid Glamorgan	38.1	25.5	33.8	28.0
Pembrokeshire	8.8	9.6	7.6	7.5
Powys	3.5	5.9	5.8	6.0
South Glamorgan	83.9	84.9	88.3	95.0
West Glamorgan	16.0	20.9	24.4	46.5
Totals	265.3	260.4	265.8	275

£ million	
Trust name	1996
Bridgend and District	6.7
Cardiff Community Healthcare	20.6
Carmarthen and District	6.1
Ceredigion and Mid-Wales	4.8
Clwydian Community Care	10.8
Dental Hospital, Heath	4.8
Derwen	1.5
East Glamorgan	9.7
Glan Clwyd	15.6
Glan Hafren	31.2

£ million	
Trust name	1996
Glan y Mor	22.1
Gwent Community	5.6
Gwynedd Community	5.8
Gwynedd Hospitals	5.2
Llandough	22.7
Llanelli/Dinefwr	3.7
Morriston	6.0
Nevill Hall and District	1.4
North Glamorgan	25.7
Pembrokeshire	8.2
Powys Healthcare	8.4
Rhondda Healthcare	6.2
Rhymney Valley	6.5
Swansea	2.0
UHW/Royal Group	55.1
Velindre	0.5
Wrexham Maelor	4.5
Total	301.4

GP Lists

Mrs. Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales on how many occasions in each of the last five years patients have been removed from GPs' lists (a) in Wales and (b) in each health authority. [788]

Mr. Win Griffiths: The information requested is not held centrally.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Citizenship Applications

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will ensure that persons who have been resident in the United Kingdom for at least 10 years and whose application for British citizenship has been turned down will be given the reason for refusal. [263]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The question of giving reasons for decisions on applications for British citizenship is currently before the courts. We are reviewing our practice and shall continue to do so in the light of the judgment of the House of Lords. It would not be appropriate for the length of a person's residence in the United Kingdom alone to determine whether reasons are given.

Residency Applications (Hong Kong)

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many applications for permanent residency in the United Kingdom have been received from non-Chinese ethnic minorities in Hong Kong. [269]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The information requested is not available as the ethnic origin of persons seeking settlement in the United Kingdom is not recorded.

New Prison (Onley)

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what environmental impact assessment he has carried out of the proposals for a new Category 'B' Prison at Onley. [130]

Ms Joyce Quin: An assessment of the visual impact of the proposed new prison has been carried out by independent consultants. An illustrative landscape scheme has been prepared on the basis of this assessment: a wildlife study will follow.

Wrongful Convictions

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he expects to make a final financial compensation offer to Judith Ward, wrongly convicted of the 1973 M62 coach bombing. [181]

Mr. Michael: Judith Ward's final claim for compensation was only received in the Home Office in April 1997. The next stage involves reaching agreement with Ms Ward on the terms of a memorandum setting out the details of her claim, which will then be forwarded to the independent assessor who is responsible for determining the amount of compensation to be offered. In the circumstances, it is not possible to say precisely when the final offer will be made.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many claims for financial compensation in the case of individuals who were found by the Court of Appeal to have been wrongfully convicted were settled in 1996-97; and on what dates their convictions were quashed. [183]

Mr. Michael: Sixty-five compensation claims were settled during 1996-97, including 50 stemming from the quashing of a high number of drink-driving convictions in Greater Manchester following possible contamination of blood samples. No central record is maintained of the dates on which the convictions were quashed in those cases involving wrongful conviction.

Special Secure Units

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will review the policy under which inmates in prison special secure units may only receive visits if they are physically separated from their visitors by a glass screen. [184]

Ms Joyce Quin: The policy of mandatory closed visits for exceptional risk prisoners will be kept under review.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what action he proposes to take in respect of the March 1997 Amnesty International report relating to conditions in the special secure units at HMP Full Sutton, HMP Belmarsh and HMP Whitemoor. [309]

Ms Quin: Ministers will consider the Amnesty International report and a response will be submitted in due course.

Mohammed Al Fayed

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if Mohammed Al Fayed has lodged a fresh application for British citizenship. [1023]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: It would be for Mr. Al Fayed to disclose any such details.

Hunger Strikes

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how long prisoner Ellis Sherwood has been on hunger strike; and if he will make a statement. [159]

Ms Joyce Quin [holding answer 19 May 1997]: Mr. Sherwood first began his food refusal on 12 April 1997 in protest at being held on the basic regime wing at Long Lartin prison

Mr. Sherwood suspended his protest between 20 and 24 April during a short stay in the Health Care Centre. He was moved back to normal location on 24 April and re-commenced his protest on 27 April. His health is being monitored daily by a doctor.

Danny McNamee

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what progress has been made in considering the request of Danny McNamee currently detained at HMP Full Sutton for his exceptional risk security classification to be reduced and for him to be moved out of the special secure unit. [161]

Ms Joyce Quin [holding answer 19 May 1997]: Mr. McNamee's security categorisation and escape risk classification were reviewed by the category A committee of the Prison Service on 23 April 1997. The committee's recommendation, approved by the Director of Dispersal Prisons, was that he should remain a category A prisoner and continue to be classified as an exceptional escape risk. Mr. McNamee will be notified shortly of the reasons for this decision.

HEALTH

Private Finance Initiative

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will publish the public sector equivalent cost assessments for each project which is the subject of a PFI funding bid application currently under consideration by his Department. [18]

Mr. Milburn: The information requested could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will ensure that community health councils are given access to information on each relevant PFI funding application for NHS facilities. [20]

Mr. Milburn: Health authorities have a statutory duty to consult their local Community Health Councils (CHCs) on proposals brought forward by National Health Service trusts for substantial developments or variations in services. In any major private finance initiative scheme, the views of CHCs will therefore have to be considered.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will review each NHS PFI bid where the projected number of specialty beds is less than currently provided for under existing facilities. [27]

Mr. Milburn: Any private finance initiative proposal must have the full backing of its purchaser health authorities before it is approved. Purchasers must be

consulted so that they can satisfy themselves that a PFI scheme is affordable, is consistent with their healthcare strategies and represents the best way of meeting patient needs. The number and types of bed required will be one of the factors they will take into consideration. The local health authority must, in turn, consult the relevant Community Health Council—who represent the public interest in the health service—when any major service change, including major changes in bed numbers, is proposed by a trust.

Life Support Engineering Ltd.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what representations he has received from NHS purchasers of cases of repeat invoicing by Life Support Engineering Ltd. [16]

Mr. Milburn: We have received no representations from National Health Service purchasers about this company.

Drugs Deaths

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what proposals he has to reduce the number of deaths (a) resulting from the use of medicinal drugs and (b) of those addicted to medicines. [107]

Ms Jowell: No medicine which is effective is completely risk-free. Therefore, there are well-established systems for licensing and monitoring the safety of all medicines available in the United Kingdom. These ensure the benefits of medicines outweigh any risks and prevent users coming to unnecessary harm.

The clinical needs of the patient can be decided only by the doctor treating the patient at the time. To assist doctors, the Department of Health provides and funds a full range of educational information and advice. The Medicines Control Agency alerts health professionals to unexpected drug hazards.

These measures are kept under regular review and we will take action as appropriate to maintain necessary safeguards to protect public health.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Public Records

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will review section 5 of the Public Records Act 1958 to allow public inspection of classes of public records earlier than 30 years after they were created. [270]

Mr. Hoon: Section 5 of the Public Records Act 1958 already gives power to the Lord Chancellor to prescribe a public access period of less than 30 years for particular public records in the Public Records Office. For example, records of British Coal and of the Treasury Solicitor concerning the Aberfan Disaster in 1966 and the subsequent inquiry were all opened together, although a number of them were less than 30 years old.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Class Sizes

Mr. Hogg: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on his proposal to cut class sizes, stating the maximum class size that will be allowed and the estimated cost of achieving that. [596]

Mr. Byers: Our policy is to phase out classes of over 30 for all five, six and seven-year-olds during the lifetime of this Parliament. The detailed costs of achieving that objective will depend on how LEAs and school implement reductions in class sizes.

Assisted Places Scheme

Mr. Hogg: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what estimate he has made of the savings that will result from phasing out the assisted places scheme. [597]

Mr. Byers: Phasing out the assisted places scheme will lead to savings of about £100 million in total by the year 2000 which will be used to reduce class sizes for five, six and seven-year-olds.

Mrs. Anne Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will name the independent schools and number of assisted places in each presently available in the Cambridge constituency. [602]

Mr. Byers: The number of entry places available at each of the three participating schools in the Cambridge constituency in academic year 1996-97 is given in the following table:

<i>School name</i>	<i>Number of entry places available</i>
Perse School for Boys	16
Perse School for Girls	25
St. Mary's School	25

Mrs. Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will estimate the eventual savings from phasing out the assisted places scheme in the schools located in the Cambridge constituency. [603]

Mr. Byers: Estimates of the eventual savings from phasing out the assisted places scheme have not been compiled on a local education authority or constituency basis. The current annual cost of the scheme at the three participating schools in Cambridge totals some £750,000.

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many pupils have been accepted on to the assisted places scheme for September 1997; if these pupils will be allowed to take up their places in independent schools; and if he will make a statement. [752]

Mr. Byers: The number of children who will have taken up assisted places at the start of the academic year 1997-98 will not be available until participating schools have made their statistical returns by the middle of the Autumn term 1997. Some 10,700 assisted places on entry will be available at 1 September, and we propose to allow

any pupil selected during the current school year to take up such a place, provided he or she joins the school at the start of the 1997-98 school year.

Nursery Education (Lancashire)

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what percentage of children were in nursery education in Lancashire in each year since 1992. [699]

Ms Estelle Morris: The information available is shown in the following table:

Year	Percentage of children in nursery education in Lancashire
1992	18
1993	19
1994	21
1995	21
1996	21

Participation rates for all children under 5 in maintained nursery and primary schools in Lancashire are as follows:

Year	Percentage of children under five years of age in maintained nursery and primary schools in Lancashire
1992	50
1993	52
1994	53
1995	54
1996	54

This table does not include those pupils in Special schools.

Doodfield Primary School, Stockport

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he has received an application from the governor of Doodfield primary school, Hawk Green, Stockport, to opt out of LEA control; what criteria he will use in determining such applications; and what factors govern his timetable in making such decisions. [627]

Mr. Byers: An application for grant maintained status was published on 23 April by the governors of Doodfield primary school and has been received in the Department. All proposals in respect of schools will be considered on their individual merits, taking account of all relevant considerations. There is a two-month period following publication during which statutory objections may be made to the proposals. We would aim to reach a decision as soon as is compatible with consideration of all the relevant issues, including consideration of any related statutory proposals.

Primary School Teachers

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what is the average cost of each full-time primary school teacher in the present financial year. [764]

Mr. Byers: The Department's estimate of the average cost of each full-time primary school teacher in the present financial year is around £25,600. This includes salary, national insurance and employers' superannuation costs.

Secondary School Pupils (Cost)

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what is the average cost per full-time pupil in secondary education, excluding pupils in receipt of special needs provision, in the present financial year. [765]

Mr. Byers: In 1995-96, the latest year for which data are available, the net institutional expenditure per pupil in LEA maintained secondary schools, excluding special schools, in England was £2,286.

Literacy and Numeracy

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what percentage of pupils currently reach level four in (a) literacy and (b) numeracy standard assessment tests; and if he will make a statement. [750]

Ms Estelle Morris: In 1996, the percentages of 11 year old pupils achieving level 4 or above in English and mathematics in England were as follows:

Teacher assessment test		
	Per cent.	Per cent.
English	60	58
Mathematics	60	54

The Secretary of State announced last week, 13 May, tough new national targets: by the time of the tests in 2002, 75 per cent. of 11 year olds would be reaching the standards expected for their age in maths, and; 80 per cent. would be reaching the expected standards in English. To support these targets he has established separate Literacy and Numeracy Task Forces to report on how best to boost standards in schools.

Class Sizes

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many classes in the new county of Wiltshire have over 30 children in (a) primary schools, (b) first schools and (c) middle schools. [98]

Mr. Byers: The information requested is shown in the following table.

Number of classes with 31 or more pupils taught by one teacher in maintained primary schools in the new unitary authority area of Wiltshire¹

January 1996	
Classes in primary schools	Of which classes in first schools
291	11

¹ There were no middle schools in the new unitary authority area of Wiltshire in January 1996.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

ENVIRONMENT AND THE REGIONS

Civil Service (Ethnic Minorities)

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what proposals he has to increase the number of employees from ethnic minorities within his Department. [306]

Mr. Prescott: My Departments' current measures to enhance and encourage the employment and advancement of ethnic minorities are as follows.

Action plans for people of ethnic minority origin were first published in 1991 and are under constant review along with other equal opportunities action plans for women and disabled staff within which they are consolidated. Examples of how the action plans for ethnic minorities are put into practice include: the provision of a range of equal opportunities training for managers and staff; positive action training for developing the potential of ethnic minority staff only; training for members of interview panels; publicising staff vacancies in specialist recruitment publications which feature role models to help encourage ethnic minority group representation; a revised approach to staff appraisal procedures, backed up by mandatory training programmes, to eliminate prejudice by focusing on clarified objectives and a competency-based framework for assessing individuals' performance; participation in the Windsor Fellowship Scheme, providing vacation work experience for ethnic minority undergraduates and in the Office of Public Service's Double Disadvantage Study relating to ethnic minority women; membership of a mentoring consortium led by the East London University to contribute to the development of ethnic minority students through establishing links with role models in employment; offering networking opportunities for ethnic minority staff and positively encouraging them to apply for promotion and sit as panel members; monitoring and analysing success rates by ethnic origin of the processes of recruitment, internal postings, advancement, staff appraisal; identifying any barriers to progress and improving the processes to ensure equality of opportunity in the workplace and reflect local needs; and formal annual reporting to Board level, the Trades Union Side and staff generally about equal opportunities progress. Executive Agencies have autonomy to develop comparable local strategies.

I shall want to review and consider the adequacy of these measures.

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many civil servants at each grade within his Department were of Asian origin on 5 May. [305]

Mr. Prescott: Through voluntary and confidential surveys, the total number of civil servants at each grade who have declared their ethnic origin as Asian are:

DEPARTMENT OF THE ENVIRONMENT, Regions and Agencies (excluding Health and Safety Executive)

Grade and grade equivalents

Grade 6	0
Grade 7	5
SEO	2
HEO	14
EO	29
AO	63
AA	24

Department of Transport, Regions and Agencies

Grade and grade equivalent	Number
Grade 6	5
Grade 7	17
SEO	33
HEO	18
EO	48
AO	156
AA	52

Cottamwear District Centre Site, Preston

Mr. Jack: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what powers the Commission for New Towns has to revise its present proposals for the use of the District Centre Site at Cottamwear, Preston. [251]

Mr. Caborn: Proposals for the site were originally made by the former Central Lancashire Development Corporation under Section 7(1) of the New Towns Act 1981 and were approved by the then Secretary of State in 1983 under Section 7(2) of the same Act.

Any changes to the approved development are subject to the normal planning application procedures and must be approved by the local planning authority.

Mr. Jack: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what factors led the Commission for the New Towns to alter its original plans for the use of the District Centre Site at Cottamwear, Preston. [252]

Mr. Caborn: I understand that the Commission for the New Towns wished to modify its original plans so as to allow for a single large supermarket, which it believes would be more appropriate to a large new housing area and would offer a wide range of facilities than could have been provided under the constraints of the existing planning permission.

Contaminated Land

Mr. Bennett: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects (a) to publish the regulations on contaminated land and (b) to reply to the Environment Committee's report on contaminated land (Second report, Session 1996-97, HC 22). [36]

Ms Angela Eagle: We hope to make an announcement on how we propose to proceed before the Summer Recess and to provide a full response to the Environment Committee's report when Parliament reassembles in the Autumn.

Competitive Tendering

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what studies his Department has undertaken concerning a replacement for compulsory competitive tendering. [261]

Mr. Raynsford: We are currently considering, with local government and other interested parties, the best means to take forward our Manifesto commitment to replace compulsory competitive tendering with a duty on local authorities to secure 'Best Value'.

London Strategic Authority Referendum

Mr. Hill: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is the timetable for the referendum on an elected strategic authority and mayor for London. [135]

Mr. Raynsford: Subject to the necessary legislation being enacted by Parliament, we propose to hold a referendum in May next year.

Planning Policy Guidance

Mr. Jack: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to ensure that local authorities follow the current contents of PPG 6; and what is his Department's policy towards PPG 6. [249]

Mr. Caborn: The Government is concerned to ensure that development of key town centre uses, whether shopping, offices, leisure or other appropriate uses, actively assists the regeneration of our town and city centres, as well as key district centres. I am keen to see our policy applied firmly and consistently, taking due account of local circumstances. We are also currently considering our Response to the Environment Committee's recent report on Shopping Centres.

Housing Development (Towns and Cities)

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if the Government remain committed to 60 per cent. of all new housing development being in existing towns and cities. [236]

Mr. Raynsford: Sixty per cent. was an option put forward in the Green Paper on Household Growth published for consultation last year. We are now considering all the responses received before deciding how the issues surrounding household growth should be taken forward.

Urban Commons

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make it his policy to mark urban commons as such on Ordnance Survey maps. [260]

Mr. Raynsford: The recording of information in Ordnance Survey's National Topographic Database and its depiction on maps at various scales are primarily a matter of resources. Funding to collect, store and disseminate information comes from two sources—commercial sales of OS products and from government funding for those OS activities which are judged to be in the national interest. Discussions are currently underway on the funding of a National Interest in Mapping Service Agreement (NIMSA) and the Ordnance Survey activities to be covered by it. I have ensured that the question of recording urban commons is included in the considerations. A decision on NIMSA is expected to be taken by Ministers later in the year.

Leghold Traps

Mr. Gummer: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will support the ban on the import of furs caught by leghold traps agreed to by Environment Ministers in the EU. [638]

Mr. Prescott: We expect to receive formal proposals from the Commission shortly about resolving this issue. We will consider these in the light of our aim to end the use of such cruel trapping methods.

Mr. Gummer: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what discussions he plans to hold with the incoming Luxembourg presidency to carry through the ban on fur imports from countries using leghold traps; [854]

(2) when he plans to meet his (a) US, (b) Canadian and (c) Russian colleagues to confirm the United Kingdom's decision to insist upon a ban on fur imports from countries not proposing to phase out leghold traps; [856]

(3) what discussions he has had with the Dutch Presidency on the implementation of a ban on the import of furs caught by leghold traps. [853]

Mr. Prescott: My hon. Friend the Minister of State will be meeting his opposite numbers from the Netherlands and Luxembourg on 4 and 9 June to discuss a number of issues of mutual concern, including the 1991 EC Leghold Traps Regulation. I have no immediate plans to meet Ministerial colleagues from the fur exporting countries.

Council of Ministers

Mr. Gummer: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to attend the next meeting of the Council of the European Union Environment Ministers. [636]

Mr. Prescott: I expect to attend the next Environment Council in Luxembourg on 19 and 20 June, together with my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment.

Forest of Dean

Mrs. Organ: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on his plans for environmental protection in the Forest of Dean. [589]

Ms Angela Eagle: Various protective measures already apply within the Forest of Dean. The Wye Valley is already designated as an Area of Outstanding Natural

Beauty. The Wye Valley and Forest of Dean Bat Sites, and Wye Valley Woodlands are candidate Special Areas of Conservation (SACs), and the River Wye is a possible Special Area of Conservation. Once adopted by the European Commission the SACs will receive full protection under the EC Habitats Directive. These internationally important sites are also already designated as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs); as such, they form part of a larger network of SSSIs which receive additional consideration within the planning control system. English Nature, the Government's scientific advisors, have a duty to continue to identify further sites which meet the SSSI criteria.

Homelessness

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is his estimate of the number of people in London who are (a) rough sleepers, (b) accommodated in hostels and (c) concealed as homeless and sharing accommodation. [168]

Mr. Raynsford [holding answer 20 May 1997]: Comprehensive data on the numbers of rough sleepers and on persons accommodated in hostels in London are not available. However, counts of rough sleepers in Central London are conducted on a regular basis and the most recent one, on 14 November 1996, found 357 people sleeping rough in Central London areas plus Whitechapel, the City and W1 and W2. Counts were also conducted in a number of other London Boroughs during the summer of 1996 and the numbers of rough sleepers found were as follows:

	Number
Barnet	2
Ealing	24
Hammersmith and Fulham	19
Kensington and Chelsea	25
Richmond on Thames	12
Tower Hamlets (areas not covered in regular count)	8
Waltham Forest	2

Information on households sharing non-self contained accommodation is available from the annual Survey of English Housing. The latest data are for 1995-96, when around 140,000 households in London were sharing in non-self contained accommodation. The Department's mid-1995 household estimate for London includes about 30,000 "concealed households" (married couples or lone parents living with relatives or friends) not included in the households sharing non-self-contained accommodation as they are not living as separate households. A number of these sharing/concealed households will be adequately housed and not seeking alternative accommodation.

Local Government Association

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he plans next to meet the chairman of the Local Government Association. [810]

Mr. Raynsford: My right hon. Friend met the Chairman of the Local Government Association on 4 May and again on 12 May, and further regular meetings are planned.

TRANSPORT

Road Maintenance

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what action he is planning to take following the publication of the National Road Maintenance Condition Survey. [3]

Ms Glenda Jackson: We expect to be considering plans for roads expenditure and investment generally in the coming months, and as part of this will consider the needs for road maintenance. The 1996 NRMCS will no doubt be of assistance along with many other aids to assessment.

Heavy Goods Vehicles

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what proposals he has to introduce legislation to permit the impounding of illegally operated heavy goods vehicles. [52]

Ms Glenda Jackson: We are considering the possibility for legislation on this issue.

A46 Dualling

Mr. Hogg: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on proposals to dual the section of the A46 between Lincoln and Newark; and when it is intended to commence construction works. [119]

Ms Glenda Jackson: We are committed to a strategic review of the Trunk Road programme. The terms of the review are not yet settled, but the question of whether and how quickly we take forward schemes which are at or near construction will be a key early decision.

Merchant Fleet

Mr. Letwin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the diminution of the British Merchant fleet in the last 100 years; and if he will seek to augment the size of the fleet by (a) introducing 100 per cent. tax allowances for investment in ships and (b) other measures. [629]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The size of the British Merchant fleet has declined dramatically over the last 10 years. I intend to work with those in the industry to help to develop its economic potential. Any relevant measures will be examined.

A303 (T)

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what discussions his Department has held with English Heritage, Amesbury Town Council and the Navy, Army and Air Force Institution on improvements to the A303 (T) between Countess Roundabout and the east Amesbury junction; and what modifications are under consideration. [96]

Ms Glenda Jackson: I have asked the Chief Executive of the Highways Agency to write to the hon. member.

Letter from Lawrie Haynes to Mr. Robert Key, dated 21 May 1997:

The Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions has asked me to reply to your recent question about what discussions have taken place between his Department, English Heritage, Amesbury Town Council and the Navy, Army and Air Force Institution on improvements of the A303 between Countess Roundabout and the East Amesbury junction and what modifications are under consideration.

While no discussions have taken place with the Navy, Army and Air Force Institution, discussions about the A303, particularly the East Amesbury Junction, have taken place between the Highways Agency, Salisbury District Council, English Heritage and Amesbury Town Council.

It is proposed that a study will be carried out this year to investigate the feasibility of modifying the junction to provide the additional slip roads required to make all movements possible.

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement about progress on the proposed A303 (T) Chicklade bypass. [94]

Ms Jackson [holding answer 20 May 1997]: A decision on whether to proceed with this scheme will be taken following a decision on the proposed Salisbury Bypass.

S Severn Bridge

Mrs. Organ: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to review the terms of the contract for the management of the first Severn bridge. [588]

Ms Glenda Jackson: There are no plans to review the terms of the contract for the management of the Severn Bridge.

Salisbury Bypass

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he will announce his decision on the Salisbury bypass project. [89]

Ms Glenda Jackson [holding answer 20 May 1997]: A report on aspects of the route of this proposed bypass was published on 21 March. No decision will be taken until the comments received on this report and other relevant representations have been considered.

PRIME MINISTER

EU Social Chapter

17. Mr. Butterfill: To ask the Prime Minister what assessment he has made of the implications of the EU social chapter for the competitiveness of British industry. [356]

The Prime Minister: The two measures adopted so far under the Social Chapter—European Works Councils and Parental leave—will promote good working relations. That can only be good for competitiveness. By ending the last Government's futile opt-out, we will play a full part in negotiations and ensure that the Social Chapter promotes flexibility and employability, not high social costs.

Minimum Wage

20. Mr. Nicholas Winterton: To ask the Prime Minister if he will make a statement on Her Majesty's Government's policy on the minimum wage. [359]

The Prime Minister: The Gracious Speech made clear our commitment to the introduction of legislation to set in place a National Minimum Wage. It will be set sensibly and will provide a wage floor to remove the worst excesses of low pay and exploitation of workers.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Development Policy (Ethical Issues)

10. Mr. Miller: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what plans her Department has to address ethical issues in determining Britain's international development policy; and if she will make a statement. [322]

Clare Short: Ethics will be at the heart of our international development policy.

Third-world Debt

11. Ms Abbott: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what plans she has to promote debt forgiveness initiatives. [323]

Clare Short: The Government is giving its full support to the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Debt Initiative. As I have said, the aim is to give the poorest, most indebted countries a once and for all exit from their debt problems.

Rwanda, Burundi and Zaire

12. Mr. Russell Brown: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what is her estimate of the numbers and needs of the refugees and internally displaced persons who have not yet returned home following the crises in Rwanda, Burundi and Zaire. [324]

Clare Short: UNHCR estimates that 1.5 million people have returned home since January 1996. The airlift to Rwanda continues at about 2,000 people a day. But just under 1 million refugees and internally displaced persons remain in the region. Up to 70,000 may be ex-FAR and Interahamwe involved in the Rwandan genocide. I intend to play an active role in the international effort to resolve these problems.

Aid (Poorest Countries)

13. Mr. Bayley: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what proposals she has to use a greater proportion of United Kingdom bilateral aid to promote long-term development for the poorest people in the poorest countries. [325]

Clare Short: I am reviewing existing spending programmes to ensure our resources are directed towards helping the poorest people. But bilateral programmes alone are not sufficient. We must have coherent policies in all areas such as finance, trade and the environment

which can make a real difference to eliminating poverty. We will set out our strategy in the White Paper promised in the Queen's Speech.

Aid Budget

14. Mr. Bernard Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement about the proportion of United Kingdom gross domestic product devoted to overseas aid. [326]

Clare Short: Unlike the previous government, we will keep our word. We remain committed to the 0.7 per cent. UN aid/GNP target.

Sir Teddy Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what plans Her Majesty's Government have to increase the level of overseas aid. [321]

Clare Short: As we promised during the election we will work within existing ceilings this year and next, we are committed to reversing the decline in UK aid spending.

The previous government committed 30–40 per cent. of our aid budget to be spend through the EU. We are determined to ensure this is spent more effectively.

Indian Sub-continent

15. Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement about current aid support to the Indian sub-continent. [327]

Clare Short: Britain spent £201 million on bilateral aid to India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal and Sri Lanka in 1995–96. South Asia receives the second largest allocation of British bilateral aid of any region in the world, after sub-Saharan Africa. The overall objective of our assistance programme is to help reduce poverty and promote sustainable development.

Poverty Elimination (Women)

16. Ms Maria Eagle: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what are her plans for ensuring that women are included in poverty elimination strategies. [328]

Clare Short: The evidence is clear that empowering poor women is essential for effective poverty reduction. The education of girls is also a key priority. A commitment to women's development will be a major theme in the forthcoming White Paper.

United Nations

17. Mr. Hanson: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development when she intends to next meet United Nations officials to discuss development issues. [329]

Clare Short: My first meeting will be with UNESCO's Director-General shortly. There will be other important opportunities over the coming months to take forward matters of mutual concern with UN development agencies.

European Union Funds

18. Dr. Godman: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development when she last met her European counterparts to discuss the regulations governing the distribution of Know How and Phare funds. [330]

Clare Short: I have not yet had the opportunity to meet with my EU counterparts to discuss these issues. The Know How Fund is a British Government bilateral programme and therefore part of our current review of spending plans. It is independent from the Phare programme, which is subject to EU procedures.

Bangladesh

19. Mr. Bennett: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement about aid to Bangladesh. [331]

Clare Short: Bangladesh is, rightly, our second largest development assistance programme. We intend to increase the emphasis on poverty reduction and to support the Government's efforts to accelerate sustainable economic and social development. I hope to visit Bangladesh later this year.

Mr. Gapes: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what plans she has to provide assistance to the Bihari people living in refugee camps in Bangladesh. [337]

Clare Short: There are no current plans to provide assistance exclusively for Bihari people living in refugee camps in Bangladesh. Since 1990 HMG has provided bilateral assistance totalling £0.77m for health and education projects involving Bihari communities in Bangladesh. We would hope to see the Biharis increasingly benefiting from more general development programmes run by Government and NGOs.

Sustainable Development

Ms Hewitt: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what are her plans to promote sustainable development internationally. [332]

Clare Short: The Government will establish coherent policies to tackle global poverty and promote sustainable development. We will publish a White Paper setting out our future strategy and how we will implement it. Central to the strategy will be greater consistency between our development, trade, agriculture, environment, human rights and economic reform policies.

Cuba

21. Mr. Pickthall: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what steps she plans to take to assist Cuba. [333]

Clare Short: We have a small British Partnership Scheme supporting the economic reform process in Cuba, and we contribute to the EC programme there. Over the next few months we shall be conducting a comprehensive review of all our cooperation programmes to ensure that they properly reflect the Government's new development priorities.

Ethical and Social Responsibility

22. Mr. Connarty: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what are her Department's plans for encouraging ethical and socially responsible practices by businesses which are active in developing countries. [334]

Clare Short: We see sound ethical practice as central to international development policy. We are looking at a range of ways of working with business and interested non-Governmental organisations to achieve this and to assist the formulation of practical codes of conduct.

Indonesia

23. Mrs. Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will review aid to Indonesia. [335]

Clare Short: Yes.

Population Control

24. Mrs. Ann Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on expenditure on family planning programmes in developing countries. [338]

Clare Short: Better sexual and reproductive health, including family planning, will be a priority for department. We believe that women and men in the developing world are entitled to the means to plan their families, to maintain good sexual and reproductive health and to have safe pregnancies. We will work at all levels to promote the principles of the 1994 Cairo Conference and ensure that the Programme of Action is realised.

Child and Bonded Labour

25. Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what plans she has to end child and bonded labour in the poorest countries. [339]

Clare Short: In addition to strengthening support for actions aimed at eliminating exploitative and hazardous forms of child labour, we intend to strengthen our support for initiatives aimed at assisting families at risk of falling prey to bonded labour and to play a full part in international dialogue on this issue.

Nepal

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what plans she has to re-evaluate Her Majesty's Government's development aid to Nepal. [742]

Clare Short: Our current bilateral aid to Nepal is designed to support broad-based growth, promote human development, encourage competent and accountable government and enhance the status of women. [This is set out in more detail in the Country Aid Programme Statement for Nepal which I am placing in the Library of the House]. We are looking for ways to give the programme a sharper strategic focus with greater emphasis on reducing poverty.

Iran

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what measures are planned by Her Majesty's Government to assist the earthquake victims in Iran. [741]

Clare Short: We have already provided £212,441 of emergency aid for the local purchase of relief items by the Iranian Red Crescent Society and the costs of an Oxfam consignment to the affected region. We are continuing to monitor the situation and relief effort and remain ready to provide further help.

Civil Service (Ethnic Minorities)

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what proposals she has to increase the number of ethnic minority employees in her Department. [737]

Clare Short: The Department is an equal opportunity employer. We welcome applications from ethnic minority candidates. We monitor those applications. Appointment is based on merit through fair and open competition.

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how many civil servants, of each grade in her Department, were of Asian origin on 5 May. [736]

Clare Short: The latest figures are:

Grade	Number of Asian employees
Senior Civil Service	1
Grade 6	1
Grade 7	2
SEO and equivalent	1
HEO and equivalent	5
EO and equivalent	11
AO	16
AA	2
SPS	0
PS	2
Typist	5
Support grades	0
Total	46

Kurds

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assessment she has made of the implications for Her Majesty's Government's humanitarian assistance to (a) refugees and (b) the rest of the population in Northern Iraq of the clashes between Turkish troops and Kurdish political factions. [744]

Clare Short: We are following with concern the Turkish incursion in Northern Iraq. We have not received any reports of new refugees, and no programmes for previous refugees are affected.

Some supplies for the Pest Control Programme were temporarily held up. The Demining Programme has been interrupted in some areas. We have made representations to the Turkish Government.

St. Helena

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what is her Department's planned expenditure on St. Helena in the current financial year. [587]

Clare Short: Planned aid expenditure on St. Helena in 1997-98 is £8.675 million, relating to the first year of a three year aid commitment of £26 million linked to the St. Helena Country Policy Plan and agreed with the St. Helena Government.

UNESCO

Mr. Timms: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what are the aims of her Department in respect of UNESCO. [336]

Clare Short: Our principal aim, in concert with UNESCO management and other members, is to ensure that the organisation works efficiently and effectively in the delivery of assistance that meets the changing needs of developing countries.

Mr. Gapes: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development when she plans to meet the Director-General of UNESCO to discuss United Kingdom membership. [337]

Clare Short: I look forward to meeting the Director-General of UNESCO, Federico Mayor, shortly, to discuss our future work with UNESCO.

Ms Rosie Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what her Department's priorities will be in its activities within UNESCO once the United Kingdom has rejoined UNESCO. [320]

Clare Short: Our commitment to development for the poorest people in the world requires better world governance and a more effective UN. Our rejoining of UNESCO will help us achieve these ends.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

BSE

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (1) how many carcasses of cattle affected or suspected of being affected with BSE were disposed of by burial at Beddington landfill site up to the end of 1991; and if these carcasses were buried with their spinal cords; [101]

(2) what scientific evidence underlay his Department's policy of disposing of cattle carcasses affected by or suspected of being affected by BSE in landfill sites prior to 1991; [103]

(3) for what reason spinal cords were not removed from the carcasses of cattle affected or suspected of being affected by BSE before they were buried in landfill sites before 1991. [105]

Mr. Rooker: In the early years of BSE epidemic, incineration capacity was insufficient to deal with all the cattle involved. Therefore, during the summer of 1988 this Department approached East Sussex County Council seeking licensed landfill facilities for the disposal of cattle suspected of having BSE. At that time, the County

Council was responsible as a waste disposal authority for the granting and supervision of licences under Part I of the Control of Pollution Act 1974. Following an assessment by the authority of the landfill sites then it its ownership, Beddington was identified by that authority as suitable for the disposal of waste of this kind. The Ministry's records, cross checked with those available to the Environment Agency, indicate that the carcasses of fewer than 10 cattle affected, or suspected of being affected, with BSE were disposed of at the Beddington landfill site between August 1988 and October 1989.

Compulsory slaughter of all cattle suspected of having BSE, with compensation, was introduced from August 1988. Under these arrangements the heads of suspects were removed from the carcasses for confirmation of the presence, or otherwise, of BSE and were subsequently incinerated. The removal of spinal cord was not necessary for this purpose. The Southwood Committee, the group of independent experts initially set up to advise Ministers on BSE, recommended precautionary action against spinal cords and other cattle tissues which might carry the BSE agent in respect of certain foodstuffs. The bovine offal controls introduced in November 1989 in response to the Committee's advice went further than the Committee recommended. The Committee noted without objection that some cattle were disposed of by burial.

No cattle suspected of having BSE have been disposed of by landfilling since 1991, since when sufficient carcass incineration capacity has been available to process the number of animals involved.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of the dangers to (a) public health and (b) the contamination of the water table, from the disposal of carcasses of cattle affected or suspected of being affected by BSE in Beddington landfill site; and if he will make a statement. [102]

Mr. Rooker: In May last year a sub-group of the independent Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee (SEAC), which advises Ministers on BSE, considered the issue of BSE and the environment, including the past disposal of BSE suspect cattle to landfill. They considered that, although the spongiform encephalopathy agent was not yet fully characterised, there was good evidence to believe that individual molecules were not infectious and that infectivity was associated with macro molecular agglomerations and possibly with tissue fragments, albeit small ones. On this basis they concluded

"it was unlikely that leachate from landfill sites would present a significant risk and there was certainly no justification for taking heroic measures to excavate sites, even those which had previously been used for material such as BSE-confirmed cattle".

The Environment Agency has regulatory responsibility for supervising the safe operation of landfill sites and is in possession of SEAC's advice. The Agency monitors ground water quality in the vicinity of licensed landfill sites as a check for any leachate contamination. They are assessing data on a typical selection of identified sites to determine whether there is a possibility of impact on water quality.

Mrs. Helen Jackson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many, and what percentage of, cattle (a) have been (i) slaughtered, (ii) incinerated and (iii) rendered and (b) are in storage, under the over 30 months scheme. [611]

Mr. Rooker: Up to 11 May 1997, some 1,420,866 cattle have been slaughtered under the over 30 months scheme. Of these:

Number	Per cent.	Method of disposal
69,075	4.9	have been incinerated;
1,227,763	86.4	have been rendered for subsequent destruction;
124,028 ¹	8.7	are in cold storage.

¹ Estimate based on the tonnage of product taken into store.

Mrs. Jackson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list, for each rendering firm, the amounts paid to them for rendering cattle covered by the over 30 months scheme (a) in pounds sterling and (b) as a percentage of the total; and if he will list the (i) tonnage and (ii) number of such cattle rendered by each rendering firm. [613]

Mr. Rooker: The provision of details of payments made to individual renderers, or other information from which such payments could be deduced, would breach commercial confidentiality. Companies to which payments were made were:

Canterbury Mills Ltd.
 Duncrue Food Processors Ltd.
 Dundas Bros Ltd.
 Fats and Proteins (UK) Ltd.
 William Forrest and Sons (Paisley) Ltd.
 Gilberts Animal By-Products
 Lisburn Proteins Ltd.
 J G Pears (Newark) Ltd.
 Peninsular Proteins Ltd.
 Prosper De Mulder Ltd.
 Ulster Farm By-Products Ltd.

The information sought, on a UK basis is as follows:

	Total
Tonnage of material rendered on which payment made to 15 May 1997	527,814
Total payments (excluding VAT) made to renderers to 15 May 1997 (£ million)	54,882
Estimated animals covered by above payments ¹	1,139,361

¹ Based on 460 kg of processed material per animal.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what advice his Department has received as to the role of cattle feed as the infective agent leading to BSE. [245]

Mr. Rooker: The conclusions of epidemiological investigations have been published in peer reviewed journals and submitted to Government advisory committees from time to time. These have also been included in the six-monthly Progress Reports on BSE in Great Britain which are laid in the Library of the House. Cattle feed is still considered to have been the primary route of infection, although advice recently received from SEAC suggests that a small proportion of cases may arise

as a result of maternal transmission. The SEAC statement on their findings on maternal transmission was issued as a MAFF News Release on 18 April 1997 which was laid in the Library of the House.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what projections he has evaluated in respect of the incidence of BSE in each of the next 10 years. [298]

Mr. Rooker: My officials have evaluated the epidemiological analysis carried out by Professor Anderson of Oxford University and his team, in collaboration with Wilesmith and others at VLA, which was published in *Nature*, Vol. 382. Their research indicates that the BSE epidemic will reach insignificant levels by the year 2001 irrespective of any further measures. This analysis supports Government predictions on the future pattern of the disease.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what is his estimate as to the projected cost of the culling of cattle under each of the BSE-related cull schemes. [293]

Mr. Rooker: We estimate that the selective cull will cost £185 million, although this is partly financed by the European Union and there will be savings on other schemes. The cost will depend, however, on the distribution of exposed animals and the number of animals which have to be slaughtered which can only be estimated at this stage.

It is impossible to predict with any accuracy the total cost of the Over Thirty Month Scheme, given the duration of this demand-led Scheme is unknown. However, by the end of the current financial year expenditure is expected to amount to around £1,230 million, part of which is financed by the European Union.

Expenditure on the Calf Processing Aid Scheme, which is wholly financed by the European Union, is expected to amount to around £140 million by November 1998. The Scheme's operation after that date is subject to consideration by the Council of Ministers.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what is the projected level of incidence of BSE over the next 10 years. [10]

Mr. Rooker: I refer my hon. Friend to the paper published in *Nature* in August 1996 by Professor R. M. Anderson et al, a copy of which can be found at Appendix 5 of the November 1996 Progress Report which has been placed in the Library of the House. That paper gives a prediction of future trends in the incidence by year of BSE infections. It is anticipated that the BSE epidemic is likely to fade close to extinction by the year 2001 as a result of the control measures which are already in place. It is, however, pertinent to point out the many assumptions that had to be made in making such estimates. Significant deviation from such assumptions will inevitably affect the predicted outcome.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will publish the reports relating to the diagnosis and incidence of BSE received by his Department over the last 12 months. [12]

Mr. Rooker: Reports relating to the diagnosis and incidence of BSE are already available in the fortnightly report to the Commission on BSE measures taken by the UK, copies of which are placed in the Library of the House.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what incidence of BSE-related contamination in dairy products has been reported to his Department in each of the last three years; and if he will publish such reports. [40]

Mr. Rooker: No BSE infectivity has ever been detected in cows milk including milk from animals clinically affected by BSE, nor has it been found in bovine mammary gland tissues.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food on what date Ministers were first informed of the dangers of a BSE-related infective agent. [246]

Mr. Rooker: Ministers were first informed of the possibility that BSE might be caused by a transmissible agent on 5 June 1987.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what research his Department has (a) commissioned and (b) evaluated on the transmission of BSE-related conditions through pet food. [47]

Mr. Rooker: No research has been commissioned into the transmission of BSE-related conditions through pet food. Epidemiological investigations into Feline Spongiform Encephalopathy (FSE) in domestic cats and our knowledge of the disease lead us to conclude that cases occurred because Specified Bovine Offal (SBO) could be legally incorporated in pet food until its use was prohibited in September 1990.

Mr. Nicholls: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when he expects to receive the SEAC report into the safety of EU beef production; and if he will make a statement. [136]

Mr. Rooker: The European Commission's draft report 2001/97 on risk factors and surveillance procedures on BSE in the Community has been put to SEAC and we are awaiting its views.

Scrapie

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what scientific evidence underlay his Department's policy of forbidding the burial by farmers of sheep which died of scrapie. [104]

Mr. Rooker: This Department has not introduced a policy of forbidding farmers from burying the carcasses of sheep which die from scrapie except in the case of heads which are sent to Veterinary Investigation Centres for diagnostic purposes. These carcasses must be disposed of in accordance with the Animal By-Products Order 1992 (as amended) and, where on-farm burial takes place, guidance is provided to farmers in the Code of Good Agricultural Practice for the Protection of Water.

Set-aside Land

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what area of agricultural

land in (a) Lancashire and (b) North Yorkshire is currently subject to set aside under the common agricultural policy. [706]

Mr. Rooker: The information requested is not available at present. Most farmers have only recently submitted their 1997 IACS applications which detail the areas they have set aside. Once the applications have been processed I will write to my hon. Friend with the information requested.

Rendering Industry Support

Mrs. Helen Jackson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list for each rendering firm, the amounts due to them under the rendering industry support scheme for each year in the period 1995 to 2000. [614]

Mr. Rooker: Rendering industry support schemes have been introduced for 1996-97 and 1997-98. Total expenditure for 1996-97 is estimated at about £100 million, with a provision of up to £59 million for 1997-98. As at 21 May about £90 million had been paid to renderers for 1996-97. No money had yet been paid in respect of 1997-98.

Individual companies' entitlements to support for the whole of 1996-97 have yet to be finally determined. Under the 1997-98 scheme, support payments depend on eligible renderers' production profile during the year. Entitlements for the year as a whole will therefore not be known until after the scheme ends.

I am unable to disclose information about the support which has to date been paid to individual renderers for reasons of their commercial confidentiality (exemption 13 in the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information).

Food Safety

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list each occasion on which issues relating to the safety of food have been referred to Ministers in the last five years. [39]

Mr. Rooker: Issues relating to the safety of food are a significant part of the work of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, and Ministers are consulted regularly on these matters. My hon. Friend's question is so wide-ranging that a detailed reply could only be given at disproportionate cost.

I can inform my hon. Friend that food safety issues have been considered by Ministers each day since the Government took office.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of the current manpower resources available to ensure that food hygiene standards are adequately maintained. [41]

Mr. Rooker: This is one of the areas we shall be considering as we take forward the proposals to establish a Food Standards Agency.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many veterinarians have been dismissed for failure to ensure compliance with health inspection regulations over the last 36 months. [13]

Mr. Rooker: The Meat Hygiene Service was established as an Executive Agency of MAFF on 1 April 1995 and took over responsibility from local authorities for meat hygiene and inspection in licensed fresh meat premises.

Operational and staffing matters are the responsibility of the Meat Hygiene Service and I have asked the Chief executive to reply to my hon. Friend.

Letter from Johnston McNeill to Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours, dated 21 May 1997:

As Chief Executive of the Meat Hygiene Service (MHS) your Parliamentary Question to the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food concerning the number of veterinarians dismissed for failure to ensure compliance with health inspection regulations over the last 36 months has been passed to me for reply. [13]

The Meat Hygiene Service (MHS) was established as an Executive Agency of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAFF) on 1 April 1995. It took over from some 300 local authorities responsibility for enforcing meat hygiene, inspection and animal welfare at slaughter legislation in licensed fresh meat premises in England, Scotland and Wales. The MHS has no information about veterinarians dismissed prior to this date.

The MHS directly employs 45 Official Veterinary Surgeons. In addition, the Agency makes use of 131 full time equivalent contract OVSs. These OVSs work together with Meat Hygiene Inspectors as meat hygiene and inspection teams in abattoirs. MHS staff take appropriate action to ensure plant operators comply with the relevant hygiene, inspection and animal welfare legislation. The MHS operates a clear hierarchy of enforcement starting with informal advice and guidance escalating, where problems persist or are severe, to the service of statutory notices, and ultimately progressing in severity to prosecution or action by the State Veterinary Service to revoke the premises licence where there has been a failure to respond to earlier requirements. No directly employed OVSs have been dismissed for failure to ensure compliance with this legislation. A number of contract OVSs have had their contracts terminated as their performance has not proved satisfactory.

The MHS has recently reinforced its instructions to its staff on ensuring compliance with hygiene legislation. All MHS staff have been reminded of the importance of ensuring full compliance with hygiene controls, and of those procedures which must be followed in relation to hygienic carcase dressing. In particular staff were reminded that meat showing evidence of contamination must not be health marked as fit for sale for human consumption. Where there is evidence that the health mark has been applied to a carcase showing signs of visible contamination, this will be regarded, *prima facie*, as a potential gross misconduct, and will be the subject of disciplinary investigation. Gross misconduct is a dismissable offence.

The MHS is also responsible for enforcing Specified Bovine Material (SBM) controls in licensed premises. These controls are central to the protection of public health from any risk of BSE. They require the removal from all cattle at slaughter of all those tissues that might, in theory, harbour BSE infectivity. MHS staff are also fully aware that they may face disciplinary action as a result of any failure to enforce these controls. One contract OVS has received a written caution.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of the adequacy of the food safety regulations; and to what extent they are currently being applied. [42]

Mr. Rooker: This is one of the areas we shall be considering as we take forward the proposals to establish a Food Standards Agency. In his report, Professor Philip James states that the Food Safety Act 1990, which provides the framework for food legislation, is generally acknowledged to be a good tool for ensuring food safety.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of the adequacy of the budget allocated for food safety in his Department relative to the responsibilities and liabilities placed on his Department arising from (a) BSE and (b) other food safety issues; and if he will make a statement. [45]

Mr. Rooker: The Ministry's spending priorities and the budgets allocated to them are about to undergo a thorough examination in the context of the Government's Comprehensive Spending Review.

Animal Identification

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what progress has been made in the development of a computerised animal identification system. [14]

Mr. Rooker: Cattle born from 1 July 1996 are already registered on the Agriculture Departments' computer databases.

I am considering responses to proposals for a computerised database of cattle movements. I intend to take forward rapidly the creation of this database, so that it can be brought into effect in Great Britain well ahead of the Community's deadline.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of the extent to which the current proposals for the identification of cattle meet European requirements for the lifting of the beef ban in the Florence agreement. [15]

Mr. Rooker: The existing GB cattle passport system, implemented in July 1996, fulfils the Florence pre-condition for an effective animal identification movement recording system with official registration. A cattle database already existed in Northern Ireland.

In addition, there are proposals for the introduction of a fully computerised cattle traceability system in Great Britain to record details of cattle movements centrally. These were sent to interested parties in December 1996. I am currently considering the responses to the proposals for a cattle traceability system which I hope to introduce at an early date.

Quota Hopping

Mr. Baldry: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on the Government's policy towards quota hopping. [71]

Mr. Morley: Tackling the quota hopping issue is a top priority for the Government and we shall be looking to make real progress at Amsterdam.

Beef Ban

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the estimates of the time when the beef ban is likely to be lifted that have been provided to his department by (a) representatives of the farming industry and (b) others. [38]

Mr. Rooker: I refer my hon. Friend to the statement given by the right hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major) on 24 June 1996 (*Official Report*, columns 21–24) and his belief that the conditions necessary for a decision to lift the ban on the fourth stage—meat from animals under 30 months—would be met by November.

I am not aware of any other estimates received by my Department.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Funeral Payments

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if she will initiate an inquiry into alternatives to social fund funeral payments to take account of the recommendations made by the Social Security Advisory Committee in its report of 13 February 1997 (Cm 3585). [114]

Mr. Keith Bradley: We have no plans at present to look into alternatives to the social fund funeral payments scheme.

We will, however, keep the current scheme under close review.

Pensions

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how much higher the basic pension for a person now aged 85 years would be if it had been increased in line with average earnings. [116]

Mr. Denham: If the Basic State Pension had been increased in line with the higher of earnings or prices since 1980, the standard rate, which would apply to all those over State Pension age, would now be £86.00 a week, £23.55 higher than the current standard rate. Those aged over 80 would also receive the 25p per week age addition.

Notes:

1. All calculations are rounded to the nearest 5p at each uprating date.
2. The alternative uprating has been calculated using either the Average Earnings Index (Whole economy unadjusted) as published by the Office for National Statistics of the Retail Prices Index (all items), whichever was the higher.

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when the pensions review will commence; what form it will take; and what arrangements will be made to ensure that the views of pensioners are heard. [113]

Mr. Denham: We propose to announce details of the review shortly.

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what is the present value of the basic retirement pension as a percentage of average earnings; and what it will be in (i) 2000, (ii) 2010, (iii) 2020, (iv) 2030 and (v) 2040 if it is increased only in line with prices. [115]

Mr. Denham: The information is in the table.

Year	Standard rate basic retirement pension as a percentage of average earnings
1996	17.4
2000	16.4
2010	14.1
2020	12.2
2030	10.5
2040	9.0

1. Percentages are rounded to the nearest 0.1 per cent.

2. 1996 figure is calculated compared with the average earnings of all full time employees taken from the New Earnings Survey.

3. Forecast figures are based on the assumption that the real value of the standard rate of basic retirement pension remains unchanged while average earnings increase by 1.5 per cent. more per year than the Retail Prices Index.

Appeal Tribunals

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what reports he has received from (a) the Independent Tribunal Service and (b) other sources regarding the effect of the Social Security (Adjudication) and Child Support Amendment (No. 2) Regulations 1996 on the number of oral hearings held by social security appeal tribunals, disability appeal tribunals and child support appeal tribunals. [108]

Mr. Keith Bradley: Data on the number of oral hearings since the regulation changes came into effect are not yet available. Initial information from the Independent Tribunal Service suggests that currently paper hearings are being arranged in around 5 per cent. of cases.

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if she will discuss with the president of the Independent Tribunal Service measures to ensure that doctors who are members of disability appeal tribunals are seen to be independent of her Department. [109]

Mr. Bradley: Appointments of members of Disability Appeal Tribunals are a matter for the President of the Independent Tribunal Service, His Honour Judge Basingthwaite, who has informed me that measures are in place to prevent any conflict of interest arising.

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if she will place in the Library a copy of Dr. Roy Sainsbury's analysis of the responses to the consultation document on decision-making and appeals. [110]

Mr. Bradley: We expect to receive Dr. Sainsbury's analysis of responses to the consultation document shortly. A copy will be placed in the Library.

Benefits Agency Medical Services

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if she will make a statement about the Government's policy regarding the contractorisation of the Benefits Agency Medical Services. [111]

Mr. Field: We are reviewing this and other initiatives designed to test the value for money of involving external contractors against: our objectives for modernising the delivery of the welfare system; our approach to partnership with the private sector where there is scope to apply its expertise, discipline and economies of scale in procuring public services and investment; the implications for customer service, staff and the taxpayer; and our commitment to work within announced spending totals for the first two years of the Government. We will make announcements in due course.

Incapacity Benefit

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if she will review the conceptual basis and practical operation of the all work test to take account of the evidence submitted to the Social Security Committee's inquiry into incapacity benefit (HC 80, Session 1996-97); and if she will report on the progress already made in evaluating the all work test. [112]

Mr. Denham: The evidence provided to the Social Security Select Committee and the findings of the survey of people who have left Incapacity Benefit, currently under way, will enable us to consider whether changes are necessary to ensure that the test provides a fair assessment of a person's incapacity for work for benefit purposes.

An initial evaluation of the reliability and validity of the all work test was carried out by this Department last year. A report of the findings is in the Library.

Written Answers to Questions

Thursday 22 May 1997

HOME DEPARTMENT

Stephen Lawrence

Mr. Austin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what recent representations he has received regarding the murder of Stephen Lawrence; and if he will make a statement; [186]

(2) what plans he has to establish a public inquiry into the murder of Stephen Lawrence and the role played by the police, the CPS and the judicial system following his death. [187]

Mr. Michael: An early-day motion regarding the murder of Stephen Lawrence was tabled on 20 May. We have also received a recent letter about the case from the London borough of Greenwich and are aware of the widespread concern, particularly within the black community, resulting from this case. We are currently considering how those concerns can best be addressed, and will make an announcement soon.

Drugs-related Offences

Mr. Malins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many serving prisoners were convicted of drugs-related offences in each of the last three years. [869]

Ms Joyce Quin: Information on the number of persons received under sentence into prisons in England and Wales for drug offences (excluding find defaulters) for the years 1994 to 1996 is given below.

	Number
1994	3,483
1995	4,729
1996 ¹	6,100

¹ Provisional information.

Information for 1994 and 1995 is published in "Prison Statistics, England and Wales"—tables 3.9, 4.6 and 5.6 of the 1994 (Cm 3087) and 1995 (Cm 3355) editions. Copies are available in the Library.

Mr. Malins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what proposals he has to give the courts new powers to deal with those convicted of drugs-related offences. [872]

Ms Quin: Yes. We are committed to introducing a new drug testing and treatment order, and will bring forward legislative proposals accordingly.

Drug Addiction (Crime)

Mr. Malins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what proportion of those convicted of all crimes are known to be addicted to drugs. [870]

Mr. George Howarth: It is difficult to quantify the proportion of offenders addicted to drugs or dependent on them. The Home Office has a research programme designed to shed further light on the links between drugs and crime. It includes a study of drug use by samples of people arrested by the police in various cities. Preliminary results from this study point to a higher level of drug taking by arrestees than expected. However, the study is still incomplete; the University of Cambridge will be delivering a report to the Home Office in October, which is likely to be published around the end of the year.

Crime Statistics

Mr. Malins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what percentage of recorded crime in each of the last three years was committed by persons between the ages of 15 and 21 years. [873]

Mr. Michael: The readily available information is for persons found guilty at all courts or cautioned for indictable offences and is contained in table 5.26 of Criminal Statistics, England and Wales 1995.

Copies are available in the Library.

Salman Rushdie

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is Her Majesty's Government policy in respect of ensuring the safety from the threat of terrorism of Mr. Salman Rushdie; and if he will make a statement. [993]

Mr. Straw: Decisions concerning the protection provided for Mr. Rushdie are for the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis. Mr. Rushdie continues to receive protection at a level commensurate with the threat and which has successfully ensured his safety over a number of years.

Hit-and-run Drivers

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to introduce legislation to extend police powers of arrest over hit-and-run drivers; and what other measures he plans to take in respect of hit-and-run drivers. [718]

Mr. Michael: The Government intend to make failure to stop after a road accident involving personal injury an arrestable offence. Primary legislation will be brought forward at the earliest opportunity. No other measures are planned.

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many cases of successful arrests of hit-and-run drivers have been recorded in each of the last 12 months. [719]

Mr. Michael: The information requested is not collected centrally. Information on arrests is not held centrally at the level of detail needed to isolate particular offences. Nor can hit-and-run drivers be identified in the statistics of motoring offence prosecutions, as they will form only part of those offences classified as failing to stop or report an accident (i.e. where personal injury is caused).

Onibiyo Family

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will allow the two male members of the Onibiyo family to return from Nigeria and Guyana and be granted permanent United Kingdom residency. [716]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: It is open to Mr. Abdul Onibiyo to apply at any time for entry clearance to return to the United Kingdom. Mr. Onibiyo's son, Ademola, will not qualify for entry clearance while he remains the subject of a valid and extant deportation order but it is open to him to apply to have the order revoked. Entry clearance will be granted only to applicants who meet the requirements of the Immigration Rules. It would not be appropriate to treat the Onibiyos exceptionally.

Primary Purpose Rule

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to abolish the primary purpose rule. [794]

Mr. Straw: In our manifesto, we said that we would reform the current system to remove the arbitrary, ineffective and unfair results that can follow from the primary purpose rule. We shall make an announcement about this soon.

Refugees and Asylum Seekers

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on refugees and asylum seekers from the Congo and neighbouring states. [1053]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: As my right hon. Friend explained in his reply to the hon. Member for Nuneaton (Mr. Olnier) on 16 May, *Official Report*, column 3, he has made a declaration under the Social Security (Persons from Abroad) Miscellaneous Amendments Regulations 1996 that Zaire (now known as the Democratic Republic of Congo) has undergone an upheaval such that we would not seek to enforce the return of refused asylum seekers to that country for the time being.

The declaration of upheaval relates to the fundamental changes which have occurred in Zaire and does not extend to neighbouring countries. We will of course continue to monitor the situation in the region generally.

Road Tax Discs

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will give the police powers to remove or clamp motor vehicles not displaying a valid road tax disc. [1022]

Mr. Michael: Powers contained in the Vehicle Excise Duty (Immobilisation, Removal and Disposal of Vehicles) Regulations 1997 enable the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions to authorise agents of the Department of Transport to clamp and impound vehicles evading vehicle excise duty. I understand that a three-month pilot scheme was successfully conducted by the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency last year and that consideration is currently being given on the way forward. There are no plans to give the police powers to remove or clamp untaxed vehicles.

Border Controls

Sir Teddy Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on border controls, and to what extent the Government plans to concede administration, control and judicial authority to the European Union. [974]

Ms Joyce Quin: We have made clear our firm commitment to maintain Britain's frontier controls. We will not agree to anything which would jeopardise their continuation.

Civil Service (Ethnic Minorities)

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many civil servants at each grade within his Department were of Asian origin on 5 May. [243]

Mr. Straw: The information requested is given in the following tables, table 1 relating to the non-prisons Home Office and table 2 relating to the Prison Service. To avoid the possibility of identifying individuals because of low numbers in particular grades, the figures are given by grade level (i.e. main grades plus equivalent specialist grades) and grade levels are amalgamated where necessary.

The computer systems used do not allow for the provision of data on a particular retrospective date and the figures, which have been supplied by the Department's Information Technology units, relate to the position on 12 May (table 1) and 15 May (table 2). The Prison Service information has been supplied from a database which is currently being updated.

Table 1: Number of Civil Servants of Asian origin (excluding prison service) by grade level

Grade level	Number
Administrative assistant	147
Administrative officer	189
Executive officer	94
Higher executive officer	18
Senior executive officer and above	8
Total	456

Data extracted on 12 May 1997 (monthly snapshot) for serving, permanent, non-industrial staff.

Table 2: Number of civil servants of Asian origin by grade level: prison service

Grade level	Number
Administrative assistant	60
Administrative officer	212
Executive officer	47
Higher executive officer and senior executive officer	22
Grade 7	13
Grade 6 and above	37
Total	391

Data extracted on 15 May 1997 for serving, permanent, non-industrial staff.

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what proposals he has to increase the number of employees from ethnic minorities within his Department. [244]

Mr. Straw: I am undertaking a review of the current position. Although measures used in the past have been relatively successful in attracting ethnic minority recruits, I remain concerned about the under-representation of employees from the ethnic minorities, particularly in higher grades.

The measures used up to now include targeting job advertisements where they are most likely to reach prospective ethnic minority applicants, and raising the Department's profile with prospective ethnic minority applicants, for example, by participating in the Windsor Fellowship programme and the National Mentoring Consortium.

As part of the Department's commitment to securing equality of opportunity for all staff, the procedures in the non-prisons Home Office for dealing with complaints of harassment and discrimination are being reviewed. The Prison Service will shortly begin a programme of racial harassment awareness training for all staff.

British Citizenship Applications (Fees)

Mr. Singh: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what provision he intends to make in respect of fees for applications for British citizenship made under the British Nationality (Hong Kong) Act 1997. [1297]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The British Nationality (Fees) (Amendment) Regulations 1997 are being laid before Parliament today. They amend the British Nationality (Fees) Regulations 1996 so as to prescribe a fee of £250 for an application for registration as a British citizen under the British Nationality (Hong Kong) Act 1997, and apply to the 1997 Act the fee of £20 for supplying a certified copy of a certificate etc.

Wrongful Convictions

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many claims for financial compensation are outstanding involving individuals who were found by the Court of Appeal to have been wrongfully convicted and on what date the individuals concerned had their convictions quashed. [182]

Mr. Michael [holding answer 21 May 1997]: There are currently 156 outstanding cases at various stages in the process of consideration.

There are currently 59 applications for compensation outstanding where a decision has still to be taken on whether the applicants qualify for compensation. There are also 27 finalised claims yet to be submitted by successful applicants and 18 claims that are either with, or in the process of being prepared for, the independent assessor. In addition, there are 52 further claims being processed arising from a number of cases in Greater Manchester where drink-driving convictions were quashed following possible contamination of blood samples.

No central record is maintained of the dates on which the convictions were quashed in those involving wrongful conviction.

Special Secure Units

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what progress has been made in

introducing a system of three-monthly reviews of the health of individual prisoners in special secure units; how many prisoners were examined in each month since the system was introduced; and how many individual prisoners have been detained in an SSU without examination for periods exceeding three months. [185]

Ms Joyce Quin [holding answer 21 May 1997]: The health care received by prisoners in special secure units (SSUs) is comparable to that elsewhere in the Prison Service. In addition, the Operating Standards for SSUs state that the health of each SSU prisoner will be reviewed every three months. Details of the format and content of these reviews were agreed in April and a system for reviewing the health of SSU prisoners has now begun.

Full Sutton Prison

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department for how many hours per day Danny McNamee, currently detained in the special secure unit at HMP Full Sutton, is confined to his cell; and what is the size of his cell. [149]

Ms Joyce Quin [holding answer 19 May 1997]: Danny McNamee is out of his cell for 4 hours 15 minutes a day between Monday to Friday, 8 hours 15 minutes on Saturday and 7 hours 45 minutes on Sunday. These hours relate to time allotted for general association, meals and exercise. Mr. McNamee refuses to take part in organised gymnasium activity or to work and he elects to take education in his cell. If he were to take part in these activities he would spend an additional 4 hours a day out of his cell between Monday to Friday.

The average size of a cell within the special secure unit at Full Sutton prison is approximately 3.5 metres by 2 metres.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will review the decision of the Prison Service to refuse permission for Danny McNamee, currently detained in the special secure unit at HMP Full Sutton, to be examined by an outside consultant for a suspected hernia. [162]

Ms Quin [holding answer 19 May 1997]: The medical staff responsible for the clinical care of Danny McNamee at Full Sutton prison have examined him on a number of occasions. They are satisfied that he does not have a hernia or any other condition which warrants the intervention of an outside consultant. Mr. McNamee will continue to receive regular medical examinations in line with Prison Service policy.

Prison Transfers

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many prison transfers to (a) Northern Ireland and (b) the Irish Republic have taken place in each month since October 1994; how many requests for transfer (i) have been rejected and (ii) remain outstanding; and if he will list the prisoners involved in each case. [150]

Ms Joyce Quin [holding answer 19 May 1997]: Arrangements for the exact date of transfer of prisoners are an operational matter for the prison concerned. However, the number of applications from prisoners

seeking transfer to Northern Ireland approved in each month since October 1994 are given in the following table.

Approval of requests for transfer to Northern Ireland

	1994	1995	1996	1997
January		—	—	1
February		—	—	—
March		—	4	—
April		1	3	1
May		—	4	2
June		3	3	—
July		6	2	—
August		1	2	—
September		—	—	—
October	—	2	2	—
November	—	—	3	—
December	—	3	1	—

Since October 1994, 31 requests for transfer to Northern Ireland have been refused.

Twelve requests remain under consideration.

Prisoners repatriated to the Republic of Ireland in each of the following months are given below:

Repatriation to the Republic of Ireland

	Year	Number
May	1996	2
November	1996	3
December	1996	2
February	1997	1
March	1997	1
May	1997	1

Three repatriation applications have been refused.

Eighty applications remain under consideration either in England and Wales or in the Republic of Ireland.

It is not normal practice to disclose the personal details of individual prisoners.

DEFENCE

Imphal Barracks

Mr. Bayley: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence on what date the Army plans to close its civilian manning and records office at Imphal barracks, York; how many square feet of office space this closure will release; and what are his plans for its future use. [600]

Dr. Reid: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Army Personnel Centre. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from David Burden to Mr. Hugh Bayley, dated 22 May 1997:

I am replying to your Question to the Secretary of State for Defence about the closure of the Manning and Records Offices and Regimental Pay Offices at Imphal Barracks, York in so far as it applies to the Army Personnel Centre as this matter falls within my area of responsibility as Chief Executive of that Agency. Although the latter elements of your Question are outwith my area of responsibility, I have been asked to provide a consolidated response.

I should explain that the functions of the Royal Artillery Manning and Records Office; the Footguards and Infantry Manning and Records Office, and the associated Army Regimental Pay Offices, currently located within Imphal Barracks, York, will transfer to the Army Personnel Centre (APC) in Glasgow on 16 June 1997.

These offices currently occupy approximately 44514 ft² (4137m²) of Building 107, Imphal Barracks, York. As the Manning and Records, and Regimental Pay Offices are lodger units on the site, when this part of the building is vacated due to the transfer of the functions to the APC, HQ Land Command as the Top Level Budget Holder responsible for maintaining and managing the barracks, will be the prime executive authority who will endorse any decision on the future occupants of the office space made available. HQ Land Command act as the focal point for the submission of any departmental restructuring and relocation initiatives, entering into formal correspondence and consultation with interested parties through the normal chains of command.

Although any plans for the future use of the accommodation are outwith my area of responsibility, I am informed that a site reshuffle of local branches is intended and that the office space will be reallocated to other MOD users, including Headquarters 15 (North East) Brigade, and elements of Headquarters 2 Division which, by January 1998, will together occupy the majority of the vacated accommodation. I understand that no firm decision has yet been taken regarding the remainder of the vacated office space.

I hope this is helpful.

United Arab Emirates

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has to review bilateral defence agreements with the United Arab Emirates. [267]

Dr. Reid: The strategic defence and security review will consider all aspects of defence. The review will take full account of our commitment to international peace and security, and our interest in continued cooperation and consultation with our friends, including the United Arab Emirates.

Nuclear Weapons

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) if the Defence Review will include consideration of the threat or use of nuclear weapons, following the International Courts Advisory Opinion of July 1996; [253]

(2) if the Defence Review will include a review of the future of Trident. [258]

Dr. Reid: As was made clear in the new Government's Election Manifesto, we are committed to retaining Trident to provide a minimum, but credible and effective, nuclear deterrent. We will press for multilateral negotiations towards mutual, balanced and verifiable reductions in nuclear weapons. When satisfied with progress towards our goal of the global elimination of these weapons, we will ensure that British nuclear weapons are included in multilateral negotiations.

Our country's security needs and foreign policy objectives must be fully reflected in the roles, missions and tasks of our armed forces. The Government have decided therefore to hold a strategic defence and security review. All aspects of defence will be considered in this process.

Bahrain

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the current nature of Her Majesty's Government defence co-operation with Bahrain; and if he will make a statement. [740]

Dr. Reid: Bahrain hosts some of the RAF force involved in Operation JURAL, which monitors Iraqi compliance with United Nations Security Council Resolution 688. There are occasional deployments by other RAF aircraft and RN ships make regular visits to Bahrain. UK and Bahraini Defence Forces periodically exercise together and the UK provides some military training to Bahraini students. The defence relationship with Bahrain is underpinned by regular meetings of the UK-Bahrain Defence Committee.

Five Power Defence Arrangement

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has to review the five power defence arrangement with Malaysia, Singapore, New Zealand and Australia. [813]

Dr. Reid: The strategic defence and security review will consider all aspects of defence. The review will take full account of our commitment to international peace and security, and our interest in continued co-operation and consultation with our friends, including in the Five Power Defence Arrangements.

Gulf War

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what progress has been made since 18 March in his Department's search for information concerning reports of dead animals being found during the Gulf war and analysed. [99]

Dr. Reid [holding answer 21 May 1997]: As well as searching for relevant information amongst our records, my Department has conducted a survey amongst serving Gulf war veterans on this subject. I will report on the results of this work as soon as it has been completed.

Defence Review

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence

(1) if he will list the estimated savings he intends to make as a result of the Defence Review his Department is undertaking; [980]

(2) if he will list his proposals for the Defence Review; and if he will make a statement: [981]

(3) what plans he has to reduce the size of the armed forces. [979]

Dr. Reid: Our country's security needs and foreign policy objectives must be fully reflected in the roles, missions and tasks of our armed forces. The Government has, therefore, decided to hold a strategic defence and security review. All aspects of defence will be considered in this process, which will be policy led rather than driven by resources.

ATTORNEY-GENERAL

Civil Service (Ethnic Minorities)

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Attorney-General how many civil servants of each grade in his Department were of Asian origin, on 5 May. [726]

The Attorney-General: The numbers of civil servants of each grade in the Law Officers' Departments who are of Asian origin is as follows:

<i>Treasury solicitor's department</i>	
	<i>Number</i>
Senior civil service	1
Grade 6	1
Grade 7	5
Executive officer	5
Administrative grades	4
Secretarial grades	2

¹ Includes two on loan to other departments.

<i>The Government Property Lawyers</i>	
	<i>Number</i>
Senior civil service	0
Grade 6	0
Grade 7	0
Executive Officer	2
Administrative Grades	0
Secretarial Grades	0

<i>Crown Prosecution Service</i>	
	<i>Number</i>
Senior civil service	0
Grade 6	1
Grade 7	0
Crown prosecutor	71
Executive officer	40
Administrative grades	91
Secretarial grades	6

<i>Serious fraud office</i>	
	<i>Number</i>
Senior civil service	0
Grade 6	0
Grade 7	0
Executive officer	4
Administrative grades	4
Secretarial grades	0

The figures set out the position at 5 May 1997 except in the case of the Crown Prosecution Service where the figures are based on information provided by staff as at 30 April 1997.

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Attorney-General what proposals he has to increase the number of ethnic minority employees in his Department. [727]

The Attorney-General: The Departments for which I am responsible, in line with other Government Departments, are equal opportunity employers. They welcome applications from ethnic minorities and recruit staff on the basis of fair and open competition in

accordance with the guidelines published in the Civil Service Commissioners' Recruitment Code "to find the best available person for the job considered on individual merit and regardless of race, gender or disability".

A number of initiatives exist designed to increase awareness of race issues and to monitor the effectiveness of equal opportunity policies. In addition the Crown Prosecution Service participates in mentoring and fellowship schemes offering assistance to undergraduates drawn from ethnic minorities.

TREASURY

Earnings (Pendle and East Lancashire)

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what estimates he has made of the number of people in Pendle earning less than £3.50 per hour. [205]

(2) what estimate he has made of the number of persons in employment in (a) Pendle and (b) East Lancashire currently earning less than (i) £4 per hour, (ii) £3.50 per hour and (iii) £3 per hour. [232]

Mrs. Liddell: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Chief Executive of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to arrange a reply to be given.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. Gordon Prentice, dated 22 May 1997:

The Chancellor of the Exchequer has asked me to reply as the Director of the Office for National Statistics to your recent questions regarding earnings in Pendle and East Lancashire.

The latest information, from the New Earnings Survey April 1996, is contained in the following table. Results are presented for the Pendle parliamentary constituency and for Lancashire as a whole; East Lancashire is not a formally defined geographical area.

*Employees on adult rates whose pay for the survey pay-period was not affected by absence
New Earnings Survey April 1996*

Percentage of employees with hourly earnings (excluding overtime) less than:

	£3.00	£3.50	£4.00
Pendle			
Full-time	1.5	8.1	14.0
Part-time	11.1	27.8	30.6
All	3.5	12.2	17.4
Lancashire			
Full-time	4.6	5.7	11.0
Part-time	7.5	23.2	37.3
All	3.0	9.8	17.1

I will arrange for a copy of this letter to be placed in the Library

Unemployment Statistics

Mr. Skinner: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will issue a separate list of unemployment figures based on the number of people seeking work. [190]

Mrs. Liddell: The Director of the Office for National Statistics is responsible for deciding the form, coverage and timing of release of statistics issued by his Office, taking into account the views of customers. ONS is presently consulting customers on the future presentation of labour market statistics; the consultation exercise was

launched through an article in the *Labour Market Trends* published on 8 May. Comments on the proposals should be sent to ONS by 14 June.

The proposals set out for consultation reflect the House of Commons Employment Select Committee recommendation that more prominence should be given to the measure of unemployment which is based on the internationally agreed ILO definition.

Unemployment

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the current level of unemployment in the United Kingdom (a) numerically and (b) in percentage terms. [296]

Mrs. Liddell: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Chief Executive of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to arrange a reply to be given.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours, dated 22 May 1997:

The Chancellor of the Exchequer has asked me to reply as the Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS) to your recent question on the current level of unemployment in the United Kingdom (a) numerically and (b) in percentage terms.

ONS produce two measures of unemployment. The first, derived from the quarterly Labour Force Survey (LFS), is defined on a consistent and internationally recognised basis set out by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and counts as unemployed people who are: a) without a paid job; b) available to start work within the next two weeks and c) have either looked for work in the last four weeks or are waiting to start a job already obtained.

The other measure of unemployment; the monthly claimant count, is based on the administrative system and includes all people claiming unemployment-related benefits (i.e. Jobseekers Allowance, Income Support or National Insurance credits) at Employment Service offices on the day of the monthly count, who on that day had signed on as unemployed and available to do any suitable work. Essentially, all people who attend an Employment Service office to sign are counted, irrespective of whether they are actually receiving benefit.

The latest ILO figures relate to winter 1996/97 (December to February). These show that in Great Britain, the seasonally adjusted number of unemployed people was 2,111,000 or 7.5 per cent of the workforce. In April 1997, seasonally adjusted claimant unemployment in the United Kingdom was 1,651,400 or 5.9 per cent of the workforce.

Although the methods of calculation and the levels of those two series differ, they indicate broadly consistent rates of underlying change in unemployment.

Bereavement Allowance

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the cost to public funds of extending payment of the widows bereavement allowance to widowers. [592]

Dawn Primarolo: Reliable estimates are not available.

Civil Service (Ethnic Minorities)

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what proposals he has to increase the number of ethnic minority employees in the Treasury. [729]

Mrs. Liddell: All recruitment to the Treasury is done on merit on the basis of fair and open competition. The Treasury participates in the Windsor Fellowship in an

attempt to attract applications from suitably qualified ethnic minority candidates, and advertise itself as an equal opportunities employer.

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many civil servants, of each grade, in the Treasury, were of Asian origin, on 5 May. [728]

Mrs. Liddell: Following the introduction on 1 April 1996 of a new departmental pay and grading structure all Treasury staff transferred from the old civil service grades, into new broad pay ranges. As at 5 May 1997, the number of staff in post in the Treasury who declared themselves to be of Asian origin was 50, distributed within the Pay Ranges as follows:

Pay range	Staff of Asian origin within pay range
A	9
B	33
C	4
D	1
E	2
F	1
G	0
H	0

Children

Mr. Forth: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the number of children aged (a) five, (b) six and (c) seven in each year between 1997 and 2001. [644]

Mrs. Liddell: The information requested is shown for the United Kingdom in the following table:

Age last birthday	1997	1998	Mid-year 1999	2000	thousands 2001
Children aged 5	790	761	761	736	727
Children aged 6	797	790	761	762	736
Children aged 7	780	797	791	761	762

Source:

1994-based National Population Projections.
ONS Series PP2 No.20 (The Stationery Office).

Landfill Tax

Mrs. Helen Jackson: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what has been the total revenue raised by the landfill tax to date. [615]

Dawn Primarolo [holding answer 21 May 1997]: As at Friday, 16 May, total revenue raised by the landfill tax is £174 million.

Unemployment Figures

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to alter the methodology currently used to calculate unemployment figures to reflect more accurately the numbers of people seeking work; and if he will make a statement. [751]

Mrs. Liddell [holding answer 21 May 1997]: The Director of the Office for National Statistics is responsible for statistical methodology. He is currently reviewing the

presentation and dissemination of labour market data. A consultative article has been published in the May 1997 edition of *Labour Market Trends*.

The proposals set out for consultation reflect the House of Commons Employment Select Committee recommendation that more prominence should be given to the measure of unemployment which is based on the internationally agreed ILO definition.

Value Added Tax

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what proportion of domestic heating oil currently subject to a VAT rate of 8 per cent. is accounted for by (a) purchases by VAT-registered businesses and (b) uses other than space heating. [180]

Dawn Primarolo [holding answer 21 May 1997]: (a) Neither the suppliers of heating oil nor Customs and Excise keep records which would enable them to specify the proportion of domestic heating oil purchased by VAT-registered businesses and which is taxed at 8 per cent.

(b) All domestic heating oil is subject to VAT at eight per cent. It is estimated that about one per cent. of domestic heating oil is used other than for space heating, ie for lighting or cooking.

Inheritances

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is the average value of inheritances for the most recent year for which figures are available. [696]

Mr. Raynsford: I have been asked to reply.

The average value of inheritances other than of surviving spouses and excluding all inheritances of under £1,000 in England in the years 1993 to 1995 is estimated at £18,600. Figures for individual years are subject to too large a margin of uncertainty to be meaningful.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Aid Recipients

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what measures she plans to introduce to ensure that the poorest members of society in recipient countries benefit from British aid programmes. [812]

Clare Short: We are reviewing all our existing spending programmes to ensure resources are directed towards tackling poverty. The White Paper will set out our strategy whereby through coherent policies in areas such as trade, environment, debt, as well as in our bilateral programmes, we can make a real impact on poverty eradication.

Congo

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what provision is being made for the emergency provision of humanitarian relief in the Democratic Republic of Congo. [1036]

Clare Short: The needs are unclear. An international assessment will be needed but UN agencies and NGOs report that aid supplies in the region are adequate to cover immediate needs. The airlift of Rwandan refugees from the Kisangani area is ongoing. Thirty-three thousand five hundred refugees have been repatriated so far. The UK has provided finance and personnel to help. I am ready to consider further assistance as needs are identified.

PRIME MINISTER

Downing Street

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Prime Minister if he will consider having the barriers and gates to Downing street removed. [1994]

The Prime Minister: Security measures at Downing Street are kept under constant review and our advice is at present they should remain.

Voluntary Organisations and Charities

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Prime Minister what consideration he gave to the experience and views of voluntary organisations and charities before he transferred ministerial interest from National Heritage to the Home Office. [1959]

The Prime Minister: The move of responsibility from the Department of National Heritage to the Home Office has been widely welcomed within the sector and will be seen as the first step to taking forward the positive change in relationships between government and the voluntary sector which we have promised.

The Labour Party consulted widely with the voluntary sector. The policy document, published in March, "Building a Future Together" was circulated to several thousand voluntary organisations inviting views on the location of departmental responsibilities in government.

Motor Racing

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Prime Minister which department has ministerial responsibility for motor racing. [1957]

The Prime Minister: The Department of National Heritage.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Literacy

19. Dr. Kumar: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many children left primary school in 1996 able to read and write to their chronological age. [209]

Mr. Byers: Fifty eight per cent. of pupils reached level 4 and above—the level expected for 11 year olds—in English in the 1996 National Curriculum tests.

Teachers

20. Mr. St. Aubyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what estimate he has made of the number of extra teachers which will be required by his proposals on reducing class sizes. [211]

Ms Estelle Morris: The number of extra teachers will depend on how individual LEAs and schools implement reductions in class sizes.

Class Sizes

21. Mr. Colvin: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what is his target for reducing class sizes in schools and his estimate of the cost. [212]

Mr. Byers: Our pledge is to phase out classes of over 30 for all five, six and seven year olds during the lifetime of this Parliament. Detailed costs will depend on how LEAs and schools implement reductions in class sizes.

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what estimate he has made of the cost of reducing class sizes to 30 or below for five, six and seven-year-olds. [1985]

Mr. Byers: The detailed costs of achieving that objective will depend on how LEAs and schools implement those reductions.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many primary schools in (a) Hull and (b) Kingston upon Hull, North have class sizes of 30 and over for five, six and seven-year-olds; and how many have over (i) 35 pupils and (ii) 40 pupils. [1163]

Mr. Byers [holding answer 19 May 1997]: The information is not available in the form requested.

Mrs Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) if he will list by each primary school in each local education authority the current numbers in each class at ages (a) five, (b) six and (c) seven years respectively; [571]

(2) if he will list by local education authority the average class size for five, six and seven-year-olds. [505]

Mr. Byers [holding answer 20 May 1997]: The information is not available in the form requested.

Nursery Places

22. Miss Widdicombe: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what steps he plans to take to guarantee a nursery place for every four-year-old; and how long this will take. [214]

Ms Estelle Morris: The Government is committed to providing good quality nursery education for all four-year-olds by April 1999 at the latest. Local authorities will be required to establish Early Years Forums, which will draw up Early Years Development Plans outlining how places will be secured.

28. Mrs. Marion Roe: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many extra nursery places have been created since the introduction of the nursery voucher scheme. [220]

Ms Morris: Assessment of Phase 1 of the nursery education voucher scheme shows too few places have been created. The Government's proposals for early years development plans to replace vouchers will be more effective.

Education Policy (Hackney)

23. Ms Abbott: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to visit Hackney town hall to discuss education policy in respect of under achieving young males. [215]

Dr. Howells: Ministers from this Department intend to meet with representatives of Hackney Town Hall in the foreseeable future in order to discuss a range of educational issues, in particular concerning Hackney schools under special measures. Under achievement of young males will be one such issue.

Job Clubs

24. Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the future of job clubs. [216]

Mr. Alan Howarth: We are already committed to an ambitious and radical welfare to work programme for unemployed people. We will review all existing provisions to assess the extent of their contribution to this policy.

Assisted Places Scheme

25. Mr. Townend: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the number of additional places in the state sector that will be required as a result of the ending of the assisted places scheme. [217]

Mr. Byers: There are over 800,000 empty places within existing LEA provision so there is ample scope available to accommodate the 10,000 or so pupils who would otherwise have entered the assisted places scheme each year. Phasing out the scheme will lead to savings of about £100 million in total by the year 2000 which will be used to reduce class sizes for 5, 6 and 7 year olds.

29. Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how much it will cost to return all assisted places scheme pupils back into the state sector; and how much money will be released to spend on the state sector. [221]

Mr. Byers: I refer the hon. Lady to the reply I gave earlier to the hon. Member for East Yorkshire (Mr. Townend).

32. Mr. Ainger: To ask the Secretary of State for the Education and Employment how many pupils are currently in receipt of support from the assisted places scheme. [224]

Mr. Byers: Participating schools' estimates show that there are some 33,140 children holding assisted places in England in the current academic year 1996-97. Final figures will be available by the end of the current school term. The number of such children in Wales is a matter for my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State.

35. Mr. Luff: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many children in Worcestershire are currently receiving assisted places. [227]

Mr. Byers: Information on the local education authority area from which assisted pupils are drawn is not collected centrally. At the 9 schools currently participating in the assisted places scheme in the Hereford and Worcester area, 1,039 children hold assisted places.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what expenditure is planned to support the assisted places scheme in (a) 1997-98 and (b) 1998-99. [770]

Mr. Byers: Current plans, already announced, for expenditure on the assisted places scheme in financial year 1997-98 amount to £140 million. Provision for 1998-99 will be reviewed in the light of our commitment to phase out the scheme from September 1998 while allowing existing assisted place holders to continue their education at participating schools.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what was the average cost per assisted place in the year 1996-97. [766]

Mr. Byers: The average cost of an assisted place in the current academic year 1996-97 is estimated to be £3,916.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many assisted places are due to be made available in (a) 1997-98 and (b) 1998-99. [767]

Mr. Byers: Some 10,700 new entry places will be made available in academic year 1997-98. We intend to introduce legislation this Summer which will stop new pupil intakes in 1998-99.

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what is the expected annual saving which will accrue from the abolition of the assisted places scheme. [984]

Mr. Byers: I refer the hon. Member to the reply given earlier today by my right hon. Friend, the Secretary of State to my hon. Friend the Member for Reading, East (Ms Griffiths).

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what is his policy in respect of children midway through their GCSEs and A levels who are currently receiving assistance from the assisted places scheme. [986]

Mr. Byers: We shall honour commitments to existing holders of assisted places at age 11 or above to complete their education.

Mr. Grogan: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many places, at what schools and at what cost were provided under the assisted places scheme in North Yorkshire in 1995-96 and 1996-97. [969]

Mr. Byers: The number of assisted places taken-up and the cost of those places for each participating school in North Yorkshire, including the City of York, in academic years 1995-96 and 1996-97 are given in the following table:

Assisted places scheme: North Yorkshire

	Academic year 1995-96	1996-97
Ampleforth College ¹		
Number of assisted pupils	—	23
Cost of places £000s	—	121
Ashville College		
Number of assisted pupils	20	36
Cost of places £000s	93	157
Bootham School, York		
Number of assisted pupils	33	41
Cost of places £000s	153	197
Giggleswick School		
Number of assisted pupils	26	34
Cost of places £000s	121	153
Harrogate Ladies' College		
Number of assisted pupils	25	35
Cost of places £000s	119	168
Mount School, York		
Number of assisted pupils	35	46
Cost of places £000s	180	225
Scarborough College		
Number of assisted pupils	42	75
Cost of places £000s	181	340
St. Peter's School, York		
Number of assisted pupils	108	128
Cost of places £000s	480	586

¹ Participating in the scheme for first time from 1996-97.

Dearing Report

26. Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when he expects to receive the Dearing report on matters relating to higher education. [218]

Dr. Howells: The Dearing Inquiry is expected to report this summer.

Jobseeker's Allowance

27. Mr. Charles Kennedy: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will assess the impact of the jobseeker's allowance on rural areas; and if he will make a statement. [219]

Mr. Alan Howarth: A full evaluation of JSA policy has been commissioned from the Centre for Research in Social Policy at Loughborough University. The Employment Service itself will be carrying out local monitoring of delivery.

School Standards

30. Mr. Alan Keen: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what role he proposes local education authorities will have in supporting schools to raise standards. [222]

Mr. Byers: The Government sees a fundamental role for local education authorities in a partnership to raise standards. The forthcoming White Paper will set out the Government's proposals for LEA Development Plans which will specify how each LEA will provide local leadership focused on raising standards in all its schools. The role will include: providing the data schools need to set challenging but realistic improvement targets; monitoring performance; working with schools before they develop serious weaknesses; taking decisive action where necessary; and promoting good practice by providing effective advisory and other professional support services.

General Teaching Council

31. Mr. Pickthall: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what timetable he plans for the setting up of a general teaching council. [223]

Mr. Byers: Our forthcoming White Paper will mark the start of wide ranging consultations on our plans for establishing a general teaching council. We will bring forward enabling legislation later this year.

Students (Benefits)

33. Mr. Andrew Rowe: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to change the rules governing student entitlement to social security benefit. [225]

Mr. Alan Howarth: We shall keep this issue under review as we develop our package of Welfare to Work reforms.

Ashford High School

34. Mr. Wilshire: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the application for grant-maintained status by Ashford high school in Middlesex. [226]

Mr. Byers: The Department has received a complaint from the Local Education Authority about the conduct of the parental ballot on grant-maintained status for Ashford high school. That complaint is currently being investigated in accordance with established procedures.

Further Education Colleges

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will require colleges of further education to consult the Further Education Funding Council in advance of restructuring leading to redundancies. [284]

Dr. Howells: My right hon. Friend does not consider that such a requirement should be introduced, since the Further Education Funding Council does not have a specific role in advising colleges on their management processes. Colleges are statutorily bound to notify my right hon. Friend where they intend to make redundant 20 or more employees and to consult with representatives of the employees.

Nursery Vouchers

Mr. Letwin: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement about the Government's plans for the nursery voucher scheme. [591]

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when he will announce details of, and a timetable for, his abolition of the nursery voucher scheme in England. [868]

Ms Estelle Morris: I refer the hon. Members to the reply given earlier today by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to my hon. Friend the Member of Forest of Dean (Mrs. Organ).

Ms Hodge: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on his plans for nursery provision for the under fives and the nursery voucher scheme. [1294]

Ms Morris: The Government will replace the previous Government's voucher scheme from the autumn term. The voucher scheme will not meet the need for high quality, accessible early years education.

The Government will consult during the summer on proposals for the preparation of full Early Years Development Plans to take effect in all areas from April 1998. In addition, we will be inviting proposals for the development of pilot early excellence centres to demonstrate our commitment to bringing nursery education and childcare closer together.

For the autumn and spring terms, local education authorities will be invited to submit an interim Early Years Development Plan. This will set out the way in which they will provide places for four year olds in their area. They will be expected to consult and co-operate with the private and voluntary sectors in these arrangements.

Where interim Early Years Development Plans are approved, recognised places in all sectors filled by eligible four year olds will be funded by grant provided by the Secretary of State paid through LEAs or direct in the case of GM schools. Where LEAs are unable to bring forward an acceptable interim plan, recognised places chosen by parents in the private and voluntary sectors will be funded by grant from the Secretary of State by reference to certificates of eligibility issued to those parents.

Information about arrangements for the remainder of 1997-98 will be sent to LEAs and other interests shortly, and to parents of four year olds and providers as soon as practicable.

Education Funding (Staffordshire)

Mr. Fabricant: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will increase the education element of the standard spending assessment for Staffordshire relative to that of other shire counties. [762]

Mr. Byers: Education SSAs reflect cost variations such as different wage levels across the country and different levels of deprivation. We are currently reviewing the SSA methodology for 1998-99 in consultation with local authority representatives.

Primary School Class Sizes

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) what estimate he has made of the number of additional teachers required to reduce class sizes for all five, six and seven-year-old pupils to below 30 pupils; [768]

(2) what estimate he has made of the capital expenditure required to enable class sizes for all five, six and seven-year-old pupils to be reduced to below 30 pupils in three years. [769]

Ms Estelle Morris: Our policy is to phase out classes of over 30 for all five, six and seven-year-old pupils during the lifetime of this Parliament. The detailed costs of achieving that objective, including the cost of any additional teachers and any capital expenditure required, will depend on how LEAs and schools implement those reductions.

Training

Mr. Grant: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) what are (a) the latest figures and (b) the figures for a year earlier from the TfW Leavers Survey for the number and proportion of leavers who (i) had been entered for vocational qualification, (ii) had obtained a vocational qualification, (iii) had failed to obtain a vocational qualification, and (iv) were awaiting their results in (1) the North London TEC area, (2) London and (3) Great Britain as a whole; how many of the TfW leavers in the relevant period had completed their training; what was the average time they had spent on TfW training; and if he will make a statement; [836]

(2) what are (a) the latest figures and (b) the figures for a year earlier from the TfW Leavers Survey for the number and proportion of leavers who in (i) the North London TEC area, (ii) London and (iii) Great Britain, were (1) in full-time job with their work experience employers, (2) in a full-time job with another employer, (3) employed in their own business, (4) in a part-time job, (5) in voluntary work, (6) on another Government training programme, (7) on a full-time education or training course, (8) unemployed and claiming benefit, (9) unemployed and not claiming benefit, (10) in a Jobclub and (11) doing something else; [837]

(3) what are (a) the latest figures and (b) the figures for a year earlier from the YTS/YT Leavers Survey for (i) male and female trainees, (ii) each separate ethnic group and (iii) those with a disability in (1) the North London TEC area, (2) London and (3) Great Britain as a whole for those (a) in full-time work with the same employer, (b) in full-time work with a different employer, (c) in part-time work, (d) on a full-time course at a college or training centre, (e) on another youth training scheme, (f) doing something else, (g) unemployed and (h) who had obtained a vocational qualification; and what were (1) the number of questionnaires issued, (2) the usable percentage response rate and (3) the percentage of respondents who were early leavers. [838]

Dr. Howells: I will write to my hon. Friend with the information requested and place a copy of my reply in the Library.

Teachers' Superannuation Scheme

Mr. Pickthall: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to review the changes to the teachers' superannuation scheme made by the previous Government with special reference to teachers and lecturers retiring after 31 August 1997 having to wait until the age of 60 years to receive their pension. [987]

Mr. Byers: The changes made by the previous Government were necessary because of the escalating cost of teachers' premature retirement, to which the Public Accounts Committee drew attention. Employers will still be able to grant premature retirement to teachers under 60.

Consultation is proceeding on further changes designed to enhance the flexibility of teachers' pension arrangements. My right hon. Friend will make an announcement about this in due course.

Secondary Places, Hillingdon

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what assessment his Department has made of the adequacy of the number of secondary places available in Hillingdon. [1296]

Mr. Byers: The Funding Agency for Schools will be consulting on the establishment of a new GM school in Hillingdon.

Further Education

Mr. Pickthall: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if the Government will continue to fund further education through the FEFC with the proposed reduction in funding next year. [988]

Dr. Howells: Following the Further Education Funding Council's notification of provisional funding allocations on 4 April, the Council will shortly be notifying colleges of their final funding allocations for the 1997-98 academic year.

Agency Labour

Mr. Pickthall: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what is the Government's policy in respect of the present system of colleges employing casual agency labour through (a) ELS and (b) other agencies. [989]

Dr. Howells: As from incorporation on 1 April 1993, further education colleges assumed responsibility for their own finance and organisation, including the appointment, dismissal, redundancy and conditions of service generally of their staff. As a result, any decisions on whether to employ staff through an employment agency, and if so which agency to use, are for the college concerned to make.

NATIONAL HERITAGE

Bed and Breakfast Accommodation

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what plans he has to review the six-bed rule for bed and breakfast accommodation. [1070]

Mr. Tom Clarke: While I am aware that the level at which non-domestic rates apply is a matter of concern to some tourism businesses, the policy responsibility for the six-bed rule lies with the Department of the Environment. Should there be any review of that policy, the impact on tourism would be taken into account.

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage what assessment he has made of the consistency of the application of the six-bed rule for bed and breakfast accommodation by valuation officers; and if he will make a statement. [1069]

Mr. Clarke: None. It is the responsibility of Inland Revenue local Valuation Officers (VOs) to maintain local non-domestic rating lists. Guidance has been issued to all VOs concerning the rating of bed and breakfast accommodation to ensure a consistent nation-wide approach. I am aware that the level at which non-domestic rates apply is a matter of some importance to small businesses in tourism.

Civil Service (Ethnic Minorities)

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage how many civil servants at each grade within his Department were of Asian origin on 5 May. [239]

Mr. Tom Clarke: The number of staff in my Department (excluding its Agencies) who have declared the ethnic group to which they belong as being Asian, as at 5 May, is as follows:

Grade	Number
Asian	
A(L)	1
B	1
C	3
D(U)	4
D(L)	2
Total	11

The 1996 Department of National Heritage Pay and Grading review made the following changes to "traditional" Civil Service grades. Grades 6 and 7 were merged to form A(U) and A(L) respectively. Grades SEO and HEO were merged to form grade B. Grade EO became C, and AO and AA were merged to form D(U) and D(L) respectively.

Concessionary Television Licences

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for National Heritage if he will introduce regulations making it easier for concessionary television licences to be obtained for pensioner tenants, other than those in warder-controlled accommodation, who are visited by officials. [82]

Mr. Chris Smith [holding answer 19 May 1997]: The Government have no current plans to extend the scope of the concessionary scheme.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Late Payments

Mr. Colvin: To ask the President of the Board of Trade how many small business organisations have made

representations (a) supporting and (b) opposing the Government's proposals for a statutory right to interest on late payment; and if she will make a statement. [848]

Mrs. Roche: I have had representations from two small business organisations, one of whom was in favour of legislation for a Statutory Right to Interest and the other one of whom was opposed.

It is clear that late payment continues to cause concern to small businesses. Business surveys consistently show that over 60 per cent. of small firms support the introduction of legislation for a Statutory Right to Interest. It is in direct response to these concerns that the Government will introduce the Fair Payment of Commercial Debts Bill.

Representations from small business organisations will be sought in response to the Green Paper on a statutory right to interest that we plan to publish in the summer.

Post Office (Franchise Transfers)

Mr. Fearn: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what plans she has to stop proposed Post Office Counters Ltd. franchise transfers, with special reference to Southport general post office. [835]

Ian McCartney: In announcing on 16 May a comprehensive review of options for implementing the Government's election manifesto pledge to grant the Post Office greater commercial freedom, I also announced that, at my request, the Post Office had agreed to suspend its programme of converting Crown post offices to agency status—except where irreversible commitments already exist—until we are in a position to make informed decisions. The proposal to convert the Crown post office in Southport has been suspended.

Small Businesses

Mr. Godsiff: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if she will make a statement on the Government's policy towards small businesses. [703]

Mrs. Roche: The Government firmly believes that small businesses form the bedrock of a successful economy and is determined to work with them to address their needs and priorities.

We are developing a range of imaginative proposals which will address the needs of the 90s and beyond. Our plans include improving the quality and effectiveness of business support; introducing the Enterprise Zone; cutting unnecessary red tape and introducing a new legal right to interest on commercial debt.

EU Research Council

Mr. Healey: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if she will make a statement on the outcome of the EU Research Council on 14 and 15 May. [1426]

John Battle: I represented the UK at the meeting of the EU Research Council on 14–15 May 1997 at which the European Commission's proposals for the Fifth Framework Programme for Research and Technological Development (FP5) were the chief item for discussion. I underlined the need for FP5 to be strongly focused on Europe's economic and social challenges and deliver real

results. The whole programme must be focused on well defined objectives, be tightly managed and involve the users of research.

Following an exchange of views, a worthwhile measure of agreement was reached on a number of key issues relating to the shape and structure of FP5. All Member States subscribed to these except Spain, which withheld agreement because it was unable to secure acceptance that financial commitments on FP5 should be delayed. Conclusions adopted by the Presidency reflect the areas of agreement on FP5, which include the need to improve the coherence of the proposed thematic programme structure while still limiting programme numbers to a range of broadly 4–6; the need for additional 'key actions' (targeted R&D directed at specific social and economic goals) within a limit of broadly 25; commitment to keeping to the timetable for the introduction of FP5; and agreement to procedures for taking forward work on the scientific and technological content of FP5, and tackling the management questions. I consider this a very useful outcome that will give an impetus to further preparatory work before the next Council in November.

I also addressed research ministers from the EU's Central and East European Associates in the context of the "Structured Dialogue" preparing for the enlargement of the European Union. I emphasised the UK's strong support for enlargement and the valuable contribution that strengthened scientific and technological co-operation could make to prospects for accession.

The Council also approved conclusions on the European Commission's Action Plan for Innovation and received a report on the progress of negotiations on the EC/US Science and Technology Co-operation Agreement.

Champagne Imports

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the President of the Board of Trade how many bottles of champagne were imported from France in each year since 1992. [1104]

Mrs. Roche: The number of bottles of champagne the UK imports from France is not available. The volumes, in millions of litres, are given in the following table.

Year	Million litres
1992	11.1
1993	14.3
1994	17.8
1995	14.0
1996	15.5

Source:

HM Customs and Excise.

Non-fossil Fuel Obligation

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the President of the Board of Trade (1) what measures would be necessary to extend the scope of the non-fossil fuel obligation to include other forms of energy; [1009]

(2) what plans she has to review the non-fossil fuel obligation; [1003]

(3) what plans she has to extend the scope of the non-fossil fuel obligation. [1010]

John Battle: I anticipate initiating shortly a consultation exercise with the relevant trade bodies of the renewable energy industry, OFFER, and the Regional Electricity Companies on a fifth non-fossil fuel obligation (NFFO) Order for renewable energy in England and Wales, leading to an announcement later in the year. I am currently considering the options for the longer term future of the NFFO, and I will make a further announcement in due course. Extending the scope of NFFO to include other forms of energy will need primary legislation and clearance from the European Commission.

Child Labour

Mr. Vaz: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what plans she has to introduce measures to ensure that goods imported to Britain have not been produced by child labour. [814]

Mrs. Roche: The Government will use every endeavour to protect and promote human rights in the work place and support the eradication of all forms of exploitative and abusive labour (including child labour) as part of our wider effort to reduce global poverty and promote sustainable human development. We will be meeting the CBI, TUC and the British Retail Consortium on 23 May to discuss practical ways forward and the purpose to meet relevant non-government organisations in the near future to progress these discussions further.

Trade and Investment (South Asia)

Mr. Vaz: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what assessment she has made of the increased economic co-operation and free trade in the south Asian region and their impact on the United Kingdom's trade and investment with and in the countries concerned. [743]

Mrs. Roche: I believe that the commitment of the countries of the South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation to introduce a free trade area by 2001 will give a considerable boost to trade within the region. This should create significant opportunities for UK companies. I will ensure that my Department does all that it can to help UK companies to take advantage of these opportunities.

Trade (Chinese Community)

Mr. Vaz: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what steps she plans to take to promote further the contribution made by Britain's Chinese community to the balance of payments through enhanced trade with the countries of east and south and east Asia. [710]

Mrs. Roche: Britain's Chinese community already makes an important contribution to the nation's commercial success at home and overseas. I would be happy to consider ways in which the community might be more actively involved in our trade promotion activities.

Trade (China)

Mr. Vaz: To ask the President of the Board of Trade when she plans to lead a trade mission to the People's Republic of China. [279]

Mrs. Beckett: My forward travel programme is currently under consideration and no plans have yet been made for a visit to China.

Minimum Wage

Mr. Lansley: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what research her Department has carried out into the effects of the minimum wage on jobs. [210]

Mr. Waterson: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what estimate she has made of the effect of a national minimum wage on employment levels. [189]

Ian McCartney: I refer the hon. Members to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for Banbury on 21 May 1997, Official Report, column 65.

Manufacturing Exports

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if she will make a statement on manufacturing exports. [700]

Mrs. Roche: In 1996 the UK exported manufactured goods worth £139.1 billion and imported manufactured goods worth £146.9 billion.

We are committed to improving the focus of our efforts to back British business selling abroad. We are establishing an export forum that will consider all aspects of our current programmes and activities.

Indo-British Partnership Initiative

Mr. Vaz: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what plans she has in respect of the Indo-British Partnership Initiative. [715]

Mrs. Roche: The Indo-British Partnership has made a significant contribution to the strengthening of bilateral commercial links between the UK and India since its formation in 1993. A number of high-profile events are planned over the coming months to mark the 50th anniversary of India's independence including a major "Indo-British Partnership: Towards 2000" exhibition which will take place in Delhi in the Autumn at the time of the State Visit by HM The Queen and HRH The Duke of Edinburgh. This will have a commercial focus but will also highlight scientific, technological, cultural, sporting and other links. A programme of promotional events is also planned in the UK later in the year involving Business Links, trade associations and Chambers of Commerce. I will be providing every possible support for the Indo-British Partnership's future activities and hope personally to be associated with a number of its events.

International Labour Organisation Conditions

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what plans her Department has to place proposals before the World Trade Organisation concerning the enforcement of ILO conditions in member states. [501]

Mrs. Roche [holding answer 20 May 1997]: The Government will use every endeavour to protect and promote human rights in the work place and are considering how best to use international fora. We will be looking closely at the position in the International Labour Organisation and the World Trade Organisation, taking into account the declaration agreed at the WTO Ministerial Conference in Singapore last December.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Defence Exports

Mr. Jack: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) what changes he plans to make to the criteria governing the granting of export licences to British companies selling defence equipment overseas; and which countries would be precluded from receiving United Kingdom defence equipment by these criteria; [276]

(2) when he expects to publish his revised criteria for the granting of export licences for sales of defence equipment; and if he will publish precise definitions of each; [275]

(3) which countries his Department assesses currently use United Kingdom manufactured defence equipment for the purposes of internal repression. [250]

Mr. Robin Cook: We have made a firm commitment not to permit the sale of arms to regimes that might use them for internal repression or international aggression. To give effect to that commitment, we have initiated an urgent review of the detailed criteria used in considering licence applications for the export of conventional arms. We support a strong UK defence industry but must ensure that exports are properly regulated. We are aware of concerns that some defence equipment exported from the UK in the past has been used for internal repression. The review will ensure that the risk of such misuse is fully taken into account, alongside all other relevant factors, in the assessment of all licence applications for the export of conventional arms. The new criteria will be made available to the House when the Review is complete. In the meantime, I have instructed my officials to consult Ministers whenever there are export licence applications which may raise concerns about human rights or international stability.

Mission Statement

Mr. Hogg: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what is the cost to public funds of producing and distributing the film to be produced by Sir David Puttnam setting out the Foreign Secretary's mission statement. [120]

Mr. Fatchett: £2,500.

Nuclear Weapons

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he accepts the advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice of 8 July 1996 on the legality of nuclear weapons as a basis of British nuclear policy. [255]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: We strongly support the goal of the global elimination of nuclear weapons. We welcome the Court's recognition of the importance of obligations under the Non-Proliferation Treaty, including the nuclear weapon states' obligation on nuclear disarmament. The Court's Advisory Opinion does not require a change in the United Kingdom's entirely defensive nuclear deterrence policy.

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if the Government intend to ratify the 1997 additional protocols to the 1949 Geneva convention. [256]

Mr. Lloyd: I assume the hon. Member is referring to the 1977 additional protocols. The Government is addressing the issue as a matter of priority.

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the distinction between individual and collective defence in respect of the legality of the threat or use of nuclear weapons, following the opinion of the International Court on nuclear weapons. [254]

Mr. Lloyd: The International Court of Justice Advisory Opinion does not require a change in the United Kingdom's policy of considering the use of nuclear weapons only in self defence, which includes the defence of our NATO allies, and only in extreme circumstances.

British Prisoners (Venezuela)

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what proposals he has to secure the repatriation of James Miles and Paul Loseby, currently detained in Venezuela. [824]

Mr. Fatchett: We have encouraged the Venezuelan government to accede to the Council of Europe Convention on the transfer of Sentenced Persons. If the Venezuelan government accede to the Convention and Mr. Miles and Mr. Loseby are found guilty and sent to prison, they would be able to apply to transfer to a prison in the UK.

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of (a) the present living conditions and (b) the medical care available to James Miles and Paul Loseby while detained in Venezuela. [825]

Mr. Fatchett: Messrs Miles and Loseby are visited regularly by consular staff. They make sure that living conditions are acceptable and no worse than those of other prisoners. Neither Miles nor Loseby have complained to consular staff about the medical care they have received to date.

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans he has to ensure that the medical care and living conditions of James Miles and Paul Loseby are satisfactory while they are detained in Venezuela. [826]

Mr. Fatchett: Consular staff in Caracas regularly visit Mr. Miles and Mr. Loseby. They check on their medical care and living conditions, and if necessary make representations to the Venezuelan authorities.

British Prisoners (Repatriation)

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on his Department's policy on the repatriation of British prisoners. [823]

Mr. Fatchett: Government policy is that on humanitarian grounds prisoners should be able to serve their sentences in their own country. The United Kingdom

is party to the Council of Europe Convention on the Transfer of Sentenced Persons and the Commonwealth Scheme for the Transfer of Convicted Offenders. We also have bilateral agreements with Thailand and Egypt.

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans he has to secure the repatriation of British citizens currently detained in Venezuela. [827]

Mr. Fatchett: On 17 April we approached the Venezuelan government about accession to the Council of Europe Convention on the transfer of Sentenced Persons. We await their reply. If the Venezuelan government acceded to the Convention British prisoners sentenced and imprisoned in Venezuela would be able to apply to transfer to a prison in the UK.

Locarno Room

Mr. Fabricant: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what was the total cost, including video production, of the presentation made to the media and others in the Locarno room of the FCO on 12 May. [618]

Mr. Fatchett: I refer the hon. Member to the answers I gave on 20 May at columns 39–40 to the hon. Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham and the hon. Member for Spelthorne.

Amsterdam Treaty

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will place in the Library a copy of the proposed draft treaty of Amsterdam. [789]

Mr. Fatchett: We placed in the Libraries of the House on 16 May an unofficial paper tabled in the IGC that day by the Dutch Presidency. It is not a draft Treaty, but it includes proposed Treaty changes in most of the areas being discussed in the IGC. We will continue to send papers tabled in the IGC to Parliament.

Panchen Lama

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what actions he is taking to secure the release of the Panchen Lama Choekyi Nyima; and if he will make a statement. [992]

Mr. Fatchett: We are concerned at the continued detention by the Chinese authorities of Gedhun Choekyi Nyima, the child accepted by the Dalai Lama as the eleventh reincarnation of the Panchen Lama. Along with EU partners, the previous government raised its deep concern at this detention with the Chinese. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs has also raised the question of human rights with them, most recently in his meeting with the Chinese Ambassador on 12 May. We will continue to work with our EU partners to urge the Chinese authorities to respect human rights and the distinct religious identity of the Tibetans.

Fishing Quotas

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what demands the

United Kingdom is making within the EU to assist United Kingdom fishermen; and if the Government have sought a larger United Kingdom quota. [285]

Mr. Morley: I have been asked to reply.

The Government will negotiate to achieve changes to the Common Fisheries Policy which will assist United Kingdom fishermen, including strengthening the economic benefits that countries derive from their national quotas. The Government will seek increased quotas when they are justified by the state of the fish stocks.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Legal Aid

Mr. Baker: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what percentage of the population was eligible for legal aid for each year from 1970 to 1996; and what estimate he has made of the percentage of the population which would be eligible for legal aid in (a) 1997, (b) 1998 and (c) 1999. [1077]

Mr. Hoon: We have no reliable means of estimating the percentage of the population that is eligible for civil legal aid. Estimates of the percentage of households eligible for civil legal aid are available for each of the following financial years.

Financial year	Percentage
1979–80	77
1989–90	68
1990–91	61
1992–93	53
1993–94	48
1994–95	50
1995–96	50
1996–97	48
1997–98	48

Comparable estimates are not available for the other years covered by the question.

There are no formal estimates for future years.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what was the underspend of the legal aid budget in each of the last three years; and what were the factors which were responsible for the underspend. [1079]

Mr. Hoon: The shortfall in legal aid expenditure as against provision, in each of the last three years for which information is available, was as follows:

1993–93: £73 million

1994–95: £107 million

1995–95: £66 million

The underspends resulted from a lower than expected number of bills and higher than expected recovery of costs by the Legal Aid Fund in civil cases.

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what plans he has to change the membership of the Legal Aid Board. [1055]

Mr. Hoon: There are currently two vacancies on the Legal Aid Board which the Lord Chancellor intends to fill in due course.

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will make a statement on the current levels of remuneration for legal aid for (a) barristers and (b) solicitors. [1056]

Mr. Hoon: I am satisfied that remuneration rates for legal aid work for both solicitors and barristers are currently set at a level which attracts a sufficient number of competent practitioners to undertake the work, whilst at the same time ensuring that the cost to public funds is not unreasonable. The present levels were considered earlier this year as part of the annual discussions with the profession on remuneration rates. No changes were made.

Mr. Garnier: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how much money from the legal aid budget has been provided to new age travellers to

challenge, through (a) the county courts, (b) the High Court, (c) the divisional court and (d) the magistrates courts, decisions to remove them from unlawful occupation of public and private land in each of the last three years. [1960]

Mr. Hoon: It is not possible to distinguish new age travellers from other legally aided applicants. Nor is it possible to identify separately cases involving unlawful occupation of public and private land.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what has been the average cost per case to public funds for cases qualifying for legal aid for each year from 1970 to 1996, in 1996 prices. [1075]

Mr. Hoon: The information requested is not readily available and could be provided only at disproportionate cost. However, information on the cost to legal aid is available from 1979-80. Average payments from the legal aid fund, by category of legal aid in 1995-96 prices was as follows:

£	Civil	Magistrates' court	Crown court	Advice and assistance	Assistance by way of representation	Duty solicitor
1979-80	936	318	n/a	72	—	—
1980-81	911	332	n/a	74	234	—
1981-82	1,018	322	n/a	77	251	—
1982-83	1,124	321	n/a	79	260	—
1983-84	1,199	332	n/a	79	272	—
1984-85	1,260	343	497	82	294	131
1985-86	1,315	349	514	83	298	132
1986-87	1,408	379	556	83	309	128
1987-88	1,457	412	599	82	330	126
1988-89	1,587	425	623	80	334	124
1989-90	1,656	449	675	82	348	118
1990-91	1,717	473	713	87	360	114
1991-92	1,788	497	788	92	387	112
1992-93	1,867	491	902	93	472	113
1993-94	1,957	470	965	94	539	111
1994-95	2,171	434	1,005	92	565	113
1995-96	2,369	462	944	96	590	133

Information on Crown court legal aid is not readily available for the period 1979-80 to 1983-84. The Advice By Way of Representation scheme was introduced in 1980-81. The Duty Solicitor Magistrates' Courts Scheme was introduced in 1984-85 and Police Station Scheme in 1985-86.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what target he plans to set in respect of the percentage of the population eligible for legal aid. [1078]

Mr. Hoon: It is not our intention to set a target of this kind for legal aid. Our aim is to ensure that, within the resources available, legal aid is used to best effect.

Immigration Appeal Tribunal

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many and what proportion of Immigration Appeal Tribunal members are (a) women and (b) of Asian origin. [1052]

Mr. Hoon: On the 1 May 1997 there were a total of 26 members of the Immigration Appeal Tribunal in post. The President of the Immigration Appeal Tribunal is

male. Of the four full-time members one is a woman. Of the 21 part-time legal members two are women. Of the 20 lay members six are women. Questions asking the ethnic origins of candidates for legal appointments to the Immigration Appeal Tribunal have been included on application forms only since 1991. Candidates are under no obligation to answer such questions. However, from information currently held I can say that two are Asian; 15 are White; one is listed as "other"; and the ethnic origins of the remaining eight are unknown. No information on the ethnic origins of lay members is collected.

Evesham Magistrates Court

Mr. Luff: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will make it his policy to intervene to prevent the closure of Evesham magistrates court before the Lord Chancellor has considered the objections to the closure plan, lodged by Hereford and Worcester county council. [1061]

Mr. Hoon: Hereford and Worcester magistrates courts committee have stated that Evesham magistrates court will remain open, during this financial year, pending the determination of the appeal.

Civil Service (Ethnic Minorities)

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what proposals he has to increase the number of ethnic minority employees in his Department. [723]

Mr. Hoon: For the Lord Chancellor's Department, including the Court Service and the Public Trust Office, the Department's Programme of action to achieve equality of opportunity for people of ethnic minority origin sets out specific commitments in respect of recruitment, retention and development of ethnic minority employees, including monitoring the impact of the commitments. Equal Opportunities statements are included in all recruitment literature and advertisements. Training on equal opportunities is obligatory for all staff in management grades, to assist in retention of ethnic minority employees. Sponsorship of ethnic minority students under the Windsor Fellowship scheme and

provision of mentors for the National Mentoring scheme help to promote the Lord Chancellor's Department as an attractive employer to minority ethnic groups.

The Northern Ireland Court Service has no proposals/targets specific to ethnic minority employees, but it is the policy of the Service to ensure equality of opportunity for all current and potential employees on the basis of merit alone. I have asked the Chief Executives of the Land Registry and of the Public Record Office to reply separately.

Letter from Stuart Hill to Mr. Keith Vaz, dated 22 May 1997:

I have been asked by the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department, to reply to your recent question concerning the number of civil servants of Asian origin in his Department and Agencies.

The table below sets out the number of employees of HM Land Registry who are of Asian origin together with their grade. The information is derived from declarations by Land Registry staff and the position is shown as on 5 May 1997.

Grade	Mandate Equivalent Grade	Indian	Pakistani	Bangladeshi	East African	Chinese	Other	Totals
SCS1	—	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
SRA (Lawyer)	Grade 7	1	0	0	1	0	1	3
RE1	SEO	1	0	0	2	0	0	3
RE2	HEO	2	0	1	1	0	2	6
RE3	EO	16	2	0	8	3	5	34
RO1	AO	15	1	0	1	2	9	28
RO2	AO	76	6	0	24	4	16	126
RA1	AA	34	2	0	14	1	7	58
RA2	AA	18	2	2	10	2	11	45
Totals		164	13	3	61	12	51	304

Letter from Sarah Tyacke to Mr. Keith Vaz, dated 19 May 1997:

I have been asked by the Lord Chancellor's Parliamentary Secretary to reply for the Public Record Office to your question. The Office is an executive agency of the Lord Chancellor.

The numbers by grade of civil servants of Asian origin in the Public Record Office on 5 May were:

Public record office band	Civil Servant of Asian origin
3	1
4	4
5	23
6	15

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many civil servants, of each grade, in his Department, were of Asian origin, on 5 May. [722]

Mr. Hoon: For the Lord Chancellor's Department, including the Court Service and the Public Trust Office, the information is set out in the table below. I have asked the Chief Executives of the Land Registry and the Public Record Office to reply separately. There is no legislative requirement to monitor the ethnic origin of Northern Ireland Court Service employees and no figures are available.

Grade level	Number of civil servants of Asian origin (including casual staff)
HEO and above	16
EO	82
Bailiff	6
AO	271
AA	38
SGB 1 and 2	33
Typist	28
Total	474

Letter from Sarah Tyacke to Mr. Keith Vaz, dated 19 May 1997:

I have been asked by the Lord Chancellor's Parliamentary Secretary to reply for the Public Record Office to your question. The Office is an executive agency of the Lord Chancellor.

The Public Record Office has no specific proposals to increase the number of its ethnic minority employees. It is however an equal opportunities employer and its recruitment practice follows the guidelines on fair and open competition from the Civil Service Commissioners' Recruitment Code (2nd edition 1996). Currently 17% of its employees are from ethnic minorities.

Letter from Stuart Hill to Mr. Keith Vaz, dated 22 May 1997:

I have been asked by the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department, to reply to your recent question concerning proposals to increase the number of ethnic minority employees.

HM Land Registry's *Programme for action to achieve equality of opportunity for people of ethnic minority origin* sets out specific commitments in respect of recruitment, retention, training and development of ethnic minority employees, including monitoring the impact of commitments.

Training on equal opportunities is mandatory for all staff on entry to a management grade and additional training is provided before staff are involved in recruitment procedures. "Equal Opportunities" statements are included in all our recruitment literature and advertisements.

High Court Judges

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many judges at High Court level and below are (a) women and (b) of Asian origin. [1051]

Mr. Hoon: The information requested is set out in the table below. The figures are as at 1 May 1997. The figures for Asian judges are believed to be correct, but as the ethnic origin of candidates for judicial office was not recorded prior to October 1991, the information may be incomplete.

	Total number	Women	Asian
High Court Judges	96	7 (7.3 per cent.)	0
Circuit Judges	562	29 (5.2 per cent.)	4 (0.7 per cent.)
Recorders (part-time)	903	67 (7.4 per cent.)	3 (0.3 per cent.)
Assistant Recorders (part-time)	356	60 (16.8 per cent.)	3 (0.8 per cent.)
District Judges	332	37 (11.1 per cent.)	1 (0.3 per cent.)
Deputy District Judges (part-time)	690	88 (12.7 per cent.)	7 (1 per cent.)
Stipendiary Magistrates	90	15 (16.6 per cent.)	2 (2.2 per cent.)
Acting Stipendiary Magistrates (part-time)	90	16 (17.7 per cent.)	0
Chairmen of Industrial Tribunals (full-time)	80	12 (15 per cent.)	2 (2.5 per cent.)
Chairmen of Industrial Tribunals (part-time)	200	26 (13 per cent.)	2 (1 per cent.)

Unsuccessful Applicants for Silk

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many unsuccessful applicants for Silk in each year since 1992 sought an interview with officials in his Department to ascertain the factors considered by the Lord Chancellor when arriving at his decision. [704]

Mr. Hoon: The factors considered by the Lord Chancellor when arriving at his decisions on Silk are detailed in the notes provided to all applicants. The number of unsuccessful applicants who sought an interview with officials to discuss their personal position in 1995 and 1996 were 36 and 41 respectively. For earlier years the information requested is not available and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Juvenile Offenders

Mr. Malins: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what is the average time between arrest and disposal for juvenile offenders in (a) juvenile courts and (b) Crown courts. [871]

Mr. Hoon: The information requested is not recorded for juveniles in the Crown court. Similar information to that required is, however, available for juveniles in the

Youth court. In 1996, the average time from offence to completion (which may be sentence, committal, dismissal or discontinuance) for defendants in indictable cases in the Youth court was 131 days.

General Election (Ballot Papers)

Mr. Letwin: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what administrative guidance is issued in respect of the opening of sealed containers in which the counterfoils of ballot papers are placed at a general election in the absence of a court order. [1014]

Mr. Hoon: Rule 55(1) of the Parliamentary Election Rules, embodies in the Representation of the People Act 1983, requires Returning Officers to send the sealed packets of counterfoils to the Clerk of the Crown in Chancery. Rule 56 provides that the sealed packets may be opened only on an order of this Honourable House or a Court, and that the order may prescribe the conditions under which the order is to be carried out.

WALES

Civil Service (Ethnic Minorities)

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what proposals he has to increase the number of employees from ethnic minorities within his Department. [231]

Mr. Ron Davies: My Department has recently agreed to participate in the Windsor Fellowship Programme. In addition we have established an outreach programme to promote career opportunities and encourage applications from people from ethnic minorities.

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many civil servants at each grade within his Department were of Asian origin on 5 May. [230]

Mr. Davies: The information requested is not available in the format requested.

NHS Trusts (Contracts)

Mr. Opik: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many NHS trusts failed to meet the 14 March 1997 deadline to agree contracts with their purchasers; and how many are now expected to go to arbitration. [779]

Mr. Win Griffiths: The objective for 1997-98 was for trusts and health authorities to agree contracts by 16 May 1997. Information about which organisations met the objective is not yet available. I will write to the hon. Member in due course and place a copy of my reply in the Library of the House.

DUCHY OF LANCASTER

Duchy Benevolent Fund

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster if he will list for each local authority area in Lancashire the number of applications received for assistance from the Duchy's benevolent fund and the number successful, listing the sums and receipts in each case for the most recent year for which figures are available. [642]

Dr. David Clark: Figures for the year ending 31 March 1997 are as follows:

Local authority area	Applications received	Successful applications	Total donated £
Blackburn	6	3	1,087
Blackpool	8	4	1,900
Burnley	17	9	3,650
Chorley	5	2	500
Fylde	3	3	150
Hyndburn	4	4	950
Lancaster	12	6	575
Pendle	18	6	3,870
Preston	13	11	2,708
Ribble Valley	7	5	2,200
Rossendale	7	5	1,600
South Ribble	6	4	911
West Lancashire	3	2	100
Wyre	3	2	803
County-wide	5	2	1,836
Total			22,840

In addition major projects supported were:

Local authority area	Total donated	Recipient
Preston	5,000	Parish Prospect
Preston	5,000	St. Walburge's
Blackburn	5,000	Cathedral Tower
Blackburn	5,000	New Direction Training
Fylde	5,000	Youth Information and Advice Centre
Total	25,000	

The Duchy Benevolent Fund also makes grants to charities such as Invalids-At-Home who then make smaller grants to many individuals some of whom will live in Lancashire.

Civil Service (Ethnic Minorities)

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Chancellor or the Duchy of Lancaster how many civil servants of each grade in the Office of Public Service were of Asian origin, on 5 May. [724]

Mr. Kilfoyle: The total number of civil servants, by grade, in the Cabinet Office, the Office of Public Service and its executive agencies on that date were as follows:

Grade	Total number of staff in grade	Number with Asian background
Non-industrial staff		
Grade 6	52	1
Senior Executive Officers	131	2
Higher Executive Officers	201	4
AT/HEOD	21	1
Executive Officers	296	10
Administrative Officers	360	14
Administrative Assistants	63	7
Professional and Technology Officer	36	1
Higher Scientific Officer	1	1
Assistant Information Officer	1	1
Assistant Statistician	1	1
Personal Secretaries	90	5

Grade	Total number of staff in grade	Number with Asian background
Typists	32	2
Support Grade Band 1	70	1
Industrial staff		
Drivers	204	2
Custody Guards	332	10
Inspector	4	1

Under the department's equal opportunities policy, all staff joining the department are invited to provide details of their ethnic background to enable effective monitoring of the policy. The information is provided by individuals on a voluntary basis.

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster what proposals he has to increase the number of ethnic minority employees in the Office of Public Service. [725]

Mr. Kilfoyle: The Cabinet Office (OPS) and its agencies is an equal opportunities employer. Applications from ethnic minorities are welcomed and monitored. Appointments are made on merit and in accordance with the principle of fair and open competition.

Quangos

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (1) if he will list the name of the chairman of each quasi-autonomous non-governmental organisation where Ministers are responsible for the appointment; [996]

(2) if he will list the name of each member of each quasi-autonomous non-governmental organisation in Cumbria, identifying the chairman separately; [998]

(3) if he will list the name of each quasi-autonomous non-governmental organisation to which Ministers or their representatives make appointments; [995]

(4) if he will list each quasi-autonomous non-governmental organisation in Cumbria. [997]

Dr. David Clark: Unfortunately, not all this information is held centrally. However, I refer my hon. Friend to the information now available on the Internet (www.open.gov.uk/pau/paupoint.htm) which sets out appointments made by Ministers to boards of executive non-departmental public bodies (NDPBs) and NHS bodies—approximately 8,500 appointments in total. Information on appointments to advisory NDPBs and other bodies is available from sponsoring departments and is often set out in departmental publications, such as departmental annual reports, copies of which are available in the Libraries of the House.

The Cabinet Office publication *Public Bodies 1996*, also available in the House Libraries, lists all NDPBs and nationalised industries, together with certain public corporations and NHS bodies, and identifies those appointments made by The Queen and Her Ministers. This information however is not set out by region.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Prime Minister's Questions

Mr. Yeo: To ask the President of the Council how many Back-Bench hon. Members she consulted about changes to Prime Minister's Questions before the change was announced. [652]

Mrs. Ann Taylor: There was no formal consultation, although Members on all sides of the House have placed their dissatisfaction with the old arrangements on record over several years.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

ENVIRONMENT AND THE REGIONS

Climate Change

Mr. Gummer: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he plans to meet his Cabinet colleagues from the other European Union countries to discuss climate change and the fixing of targets for 2005. [637]

Mr. Prescott: Together with the Minister for the Environment, I plan to attend the EU Environment Council in Luxembourg on 19 and 20 June at which climate change, including appropriate reduction targets for developed countries for 2005, will be discussed.

Conference on Sustainable Development

Mr. Gummer: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) when he plans to attend the conference on sustainable development in New York; [639]

(2) what issues he plans to include in his speech to the conference on sustainable development in New York; [640]

(3) if he plans to accompany the Prime Minister to the special session of the UN in New York. [641]

Mr. Prescott: The Prime Minister and I will both be attending the UN General Assembly Special Session in June. The Prime Minister will address the General Assembly on 23 June. He will no doubt refer to the importance the Government attaches to the goal of sustainable development and to our priorities for pursuing that goal.

Housing (Burnley, Pendle and Rossendale)

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what was the percentage of (a) the local authority, (b) housing association, (c) the private sector and (d) the total housing stock in (i) Burnley, (ii) Pendle and (iii) Rossendale assessed as requiring major expenditure to bring it up to standard in each year since 1992. [698]

Mr. Raynsford: As part of the annual Housing Investment Programme, local authorities in England are asked to provide estimates of the numbers of their own dwellings and dwelling in other tenures in their area which are unfit. The estimated proportions of unfit stock

on 1 April provided by Burnley, Pendle and Rossendale on their 1992 to 1996 HPI returns are set out below. The figures are not necessarily reported on a consistent basis because of differences in interpretation of the statutory definition of unfit. Not all of these dwellings will require major expenditure to make them fit.

	Local authority	Housing association	Private sector	Total stock
<i>Burnley</i>				
1992	3	—	20	17
1993	5	4	18	16
1994	—	2	22	18
1995	—	0	22	18
1996	—	0	24	19
<i>Pendle</i>				
1992	0	3	7	6
1993	0	2	7	6
1994	0	1	7	6
1995	0	0	18	15
1996	0	0	17	15
<i>Rossendale</i>				
1992	—	0	7	6
1993	—	0	7	6
1994	6	not reported	6	not reported
1995	4	0	33	27
1996	3	0	30	24

¹ Less than 0.5 per cent. but not zero.

Petrol

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what his Department's policy will be towards the proposals relating to maximum permissible levels of (a) sulphur in petrol and diesel and (b) benzene in petrol by 2000, at the Council of European Environment Ministers meeting in June. [1015]

Mr. Meacher: The Government is committed to taking tough action to improve air quality in the UK. We will make clear our position on the levels of sulphur in petrol and diesel and benzene in petrol at the Council of European Environment Ministers meeting in June, as part of the negotiation of a common position on the proposed vehicles and fuels directives.

EU Committee of the Regions

Mr. Whitehead: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to review the method whereby United Kingdom members of the EU Committee of the Regions are appointed; and if he will make a statement. [841]

Ms Armstrong: The first term of the Committee of the Regions ends on 25 January 1998. Before making nominations for new appointments to the Committee we intend to consider the arrangements for making these nominations and to consult local government.

Southend (Grant)

Sir Teddy Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what progress has been made in determining the grant to be

given to the Southend unitary authority for the year 1998–99; and what factors he is entitled to take into account in making such a determination. [976]

Ms Armstrong: I expect to announce the Revenue Support Grant for Southend for 1998/99 at the same time as I announce my proposals for other authorities. Such announcements have customarily been made about the end of November. I expect to apply the same grant formula to Southend as to other authorities with similar responsibilities. I have a broad discretion as to the factors which may be taken into account.

To assist Southend, and other authorities reorganising in April 1998, I intend to publish indicative estimates of the level of Standard Spending Assessment which each authority would have had for 1997–98, had reorganisation taken place a year earlier.

Carbon Dioxide Emissions

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what estimate his Department has made of the impact a reduction in VAT on domestic fuel to 5 per cent. would have on carbon dioxide emissions the United Kingdom; and if he will make a statement. [1004]

Mr. Meacher: We have estimated that the reduction in VAT on domestic fuel to 5 per cent. will result in an increase in carbon dioxide emissions of about 0.9 million tonnes per year (equivalent to about a quarter of a million tonnes of carbon) by 2010. This represents about 0.15 per cent. of current carbon dioxide emissions.

Mr. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what research his Department has commissioned into the increases in carbon dioxide emissions which would result from a programme of building clean coal plants. [1013]

Mr. Meacher: Extensive research on the effects of clean coal plants is available from ETSU (formerly the Energy Technology Support Unit) and the International Energy Agency Greenhouse Gas Research and Development Programme. The impacts that clean coal technology would have on carbon dioxide emissions would depend on the number of plants built and which other options for electricity generation they displace.

Mr. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what modifications he proposes to make to the United Kingdom climate change action programme to achieve the Government's target of a 20 per cent. reduction in carbon dioxide emissions from 1990 levels by 2010; and if he will make a statement. [1005]

Mr. Meacher: The Government will lead the fight against global warming at the Kyoto Conference on climate change this December, through our target of a 20 per cent. reduction in carbon dioxide emissions by 2010. We will review the United Kingdom's Climate Change Programme in that light looking for improvements in areas such as domestic and industrial energy efficiency, an integrated transport strategy to tackle the projected growth in emissions from road transport, and a large increase in the amount of electricity generated from renewable sources and combined heat and power schemes.

Council Properties

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is the estimated potential rental income from vacant council owned properties in Devon and Plymouth. [983]

Mr. Raynsford: Local authorities' report information on the rent loss on their vacant dwellings in their Housing Subsidy Claim returns. The provisional total rent loss on vacant dwellings in 1996–97 reported by local authorities in Devon, including Plymouth, is some £1.3 million (1.3 per cent of potential rent income); the corresponding figure for Plymouth is £0.5 million (1.5 per cent.). The corresponding figure for rent loss as a percentage of potential rent income for all local authorities in England is 2.6 per cent.

Rented Housing

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects local authorities to be able to use their capital receipts to start building rented housing. [991]

Mr. Raynsford: Legislation to facilitate the Government's Capital Receipts initiative will be brought forward as quickly as possible. Resources released under the initiative will be made available to local authorities to use in support of priority schemes which meet key objectives. We will be considering and consulting on these over the coming weeks.

Shopping Centres

Mr. Bennett: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects to reply to the Environment Committee's report on shopping centres, Fourth report, Session 1996–97, HC 210. [35]

Mr. Raynsford: We expect to respond in mid-June.

English Partnerships

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he plans next to meet the chairman of English Partnerships. [808]

Angela Eagle: The Deputy Prime Minister and colleagues look forward to meeting the Chairman of English Partnerships in common with the Chairmen of the other major bodies sponsored by this department.

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has for the development of English Partnerships. [798]

Angela Eagle: We intend to build on the achievements of English Partnerships in the context of our policies for regional development and after extensive consultation.

Planning Inspectors

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) how many planning inspectors are currently in place; and on what grades they are; [820]

(2) what is the current waiting time for appeal cases to be heard from receipt of appeals; [819]

(3) what was the backlog of appeals being dealt with by the Planning Inspectorate on 5 May. [818]

Mr. Raynsford: Responsibility for the provision of information on performance on the processing of planning appeals and other operational matters has been delegated to the Planning Inspectorate Agency under its Chief Executive Mr. Chris Shepley. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from C. J. Shepley to Mr. Keith Vaz, dated 21 May 1997:

The Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions has asked me to reply to your Questions about:

the current waiting time for appeal cases to be heard;

the number and grades of planning inspectors;

the current backlog of appeals being dealt with by the Planning Inspectorate on 5 May.

During April the average waiting time for dates offered to the parties for planning appeals to be heard at both a public inquiry and a hearing was 26 weeks from the start of the appeal.

On 1 May 1997 the Planning Inspectorate had 379 Planning Inspectors. Of the 224 salaried Inspectors there were 42 Principal Housing and Planning Inspectors, 149 Senior Housing and Planning Inspectors and 33 Housing and Planning Inspectors. The remaining inspectors were fee paid.

The planning appeal system is governed by procedure rules. These rules prescribe the time allowed for the parties to the appeal to complete the various stages of the process. As a consequence there will always be appeals in the process awaiting determination. On 5 May there were 6,879 planning appeals being dealt with by the Inspectorate in England.

City Challenge

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has for the future of City Challenge. [811]

Mr. Caborn: We will honour all existing funding commitments under City Challenge, thus allowing the remaining partnerships, subject to satisfactory performance, to complete their programmes within the agreed funding period.

Planning Policy Guidance

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to review PPG6. [817]

Mr. Raynsford: We have no current plans to review PPG6, although we are concerned to apply it firmly and consistently, and to monitor its effectiveness. The Government is currently considering its response to the more detailed and specific matters raised by the Environment Committee's report on shopping centres.

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to review PPG1. [821]

Mr. Raynsford: We have no immediate plans to revise the current version of Planning Policy Guidance Note 1: General Policy and Principles which was published in February. As we introduce policies which will strengthen the planning system, such as our commitment to regional development, we will be considering how these should be promoted through national planning policy guidance.

Regional Development Agencies

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is the proposed budget for the regional development agencies for 1998-99. [797]

Angela Eagle: This question does not arise, since we intend that regional development agencies in England will begin operation in the year 1999-2000.

Out-of-town Shopping Centres

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on Government policy in respect of out-of-town shopping centres. [809]

Mr. Raynsford: The Government supports the objective of maintaining and enhancing existing centres and focusing retail development in existing centres to assist their regeneration. The Government is currently considering the recent report of the Environment Committee on shopping centres and will be publishing a response shortly.

Green Belt

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement about Green Belt policy. [822]

Mr. Raynsford: The Government's Green Belt policy is set out in Planning Policy Guidance Note (PPG) 2. The fundamental aim of Green Belt policy is to prevent urban sprawl by keeping land permanently open. The key feature of Green Belt policy is therefore its presumption against inappropriate development in the Green Belt.

Single Regeneration Budget

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on his plans for Round 3 of the Single Regeneration Budget. [800]

Mr. Caborn: The Government is strongly committed to the regeneration of cities and other areas. It will honour commitments on Round 3 and earlier rounds of the Single Regeneration Budget Challenge Fund, subject to satisfactory performance by the schemes supported and the availability of resources.

Guidance for the fourth round as issued in March by the previous administration and potential bidders are already working up proposals. The Government does not wish to stop this work. It wishes to ensure, however, that those preparing proposals are given the clearest possible guidance on the Government's policies and priorities. It will therefore issue shortly supplementary guidance, the key elements of which will be:

- (a) a requirement that proposals contribute to the Government's Manifesto commitment to carry out a concerted attack against the multiple causes of social and economic decline, and fit with its new policies, including those relating to employment, crime and housing;
- (b) a greater emphasis on tackling the needs of communities in the most deprived areas;

- (c) a requirement that proposals should take account of existing strategies for promoting economic development and tackling deprivation, such as economic development strategies prepared by local authorities, and fit with the Government's policy on regional governance.

In addition, the Government considers that there should be a more collaborative approach between those preparing proposals, their partners and Government Offices for the Regions in order to arrive at a shared understanding of regeneration needs and priorities, and to stimulate fresh thinking. To facilitate this sort of exchange, the Government has decided that the deadline for submission of initial proposals be shifted from 27 June 1997 to 26 September 1997. It nonetheless expects those working up proposals to be in touch with the appropriate Government Office for the Region well before this revised deadline.

Garth Refurbishment Programme, Hull

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what directions his Department gave for the delaying and rephasing of the Garth Refurbishment Programme in Hull. [771]

Angela Eagle: During the 1997 Public Expenditure Survey, provision for the Estate Action programme nationally was reduced by £10 million in 1997-98, and £20 million in each of the next two years. As a result, planned expenditure on a number of Estate Action schemes, including the Garth Refurbishment Programme in Hull, was reprofiled in consultation with the local authorities concerned. However, the total amount of Estate Action grant to be given to this and other committed Estate Action schemes remains unchanged.

Green Globe Task Force

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list (a) the dates for proposed meetings of the Government's green globe task force in the current year and (b) the members, and their affiliations, of the task force. [864]

Mr. Meacher: The green globe task force was established in opposition to advise the shadow Foreign Secretary and shadow Secretary of State for Environmental Protection. The exact status of the task force in the future is still under discussion.

Out-of-town Development

Mr. Gummer: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has for ensuring that the sequential test is universally applied to out-of-town development proposals. [851]

Mr. Prescott: I am committed to revitalising town centres. I will therefore expect local planning authorities to apply a sequential approach to selecting locations and to identifying sites for key town centre uses and expect developers to apply this approach when selecting sites for development.

East Midlands Regional Development Agency

Ms Hewitt: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will establish the headquarters of the new east midlands regional development agency in Leicester. [1031]

Angela Eagle: We will shortly be consulting interested parties in all the English regions about our proposals for Regional Development Agencies, and will make our detailed decisions in the light of those consultations.

Somerset County Council

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he will determine whether Somerset county council can exceed its expenditure cap for 1997-98. [1144]

Mr. Prescott: I am announcing the capping principles for all authorities, including Somerset, today.

The vast majority of authorities have set budgets and council taxes within the limits set by my predecessor; in only three cases (out of 436 authorities) am I proposing cap limits which would require authorities to reduce their budget requirements.

These authorities are Oxfordshire County Council, Somerset County Council and Warwickshire County Council. I have proposed caps for them which I consider, on the basis of all the information available so far, to be reasonable and achievable in all the circumstances of the authorities concerned. If the authorities accept my proposed caps they will be able to issue new lower bills without delay.

The capping principles for 1997-98 are set out in the Limitation of Council Tax and Precepts 1997-98 (4 February 1997) subject to a general proviso that no authority is to be designated if its budget requirement is £50,000 or less above the limit implied by these principles. I have placed copies of this document in the Library of the House. The main points are:

- (i) *Inner London boroughs, Metropolitan Districts and Unitary authorities and the Isles of Scilly* were able to increase their budget requirements by 1 per cent. or the increase in their education, PSS and fire SSAs whichever is the greater;
- (ii) *County Councils, outer London Boroughs and the City of London* were able to increase their budget requirements by 2 per cent. or the increase in their education, PSS and fire SSAs, whichever is the greater;
- (iii) *Shire districts* were able to increase their budgets by 0.5 per cent.;
- (iv) *Fire and Civil Defence Authorities* were able to increase their budget requirements by 3.0 per cent.;
- (v) *Police Authorities* were able to increase their budgets by 3.2 per cent.

Authorities budgeting more than 12.5 per cent. above SSA were subject to a cash freeze.

In accordance with sections 54 and 56 of the Local Government Finance Act 1992, I have decided to designate the authorities listed below. The amount given after each authority is the amount which I am proposing should be the maximum amount calculated by each authority as its budget requirement for 1997-98:

Oxfordshire County Council: £339.530 million

Somerset County Council: £284.746 million

Warwickshire County Council: £292.335 million

This decision demonstrates that we are taking our commitments on spending very seriously. The authorities now have 28 days, starting today, in which to inform us whether or not they accept their proposed cap. If they accept, the caps will be confirmed by notice and the authorities can set revised lower budgets. The budgets we are proposing imply reductions of £6 million for Oxfordshire, £3.339 million for Somerset and £2 million for Warwickshire. Band D council tax bills will be reduced by around £28 (Oxfordshire) £20 (Somerset) and £11 (Warwickshire.) If an authority challenges, it must propose an alternative amount together with its reasons for doing so and will have the opportunity to meet us to explain its case. Once we have considered all the available information we shall propose final caps which will be included in an Order, a draft of which is debated by the House of Commons. If the draft Order is approved, final caps are set by notice and revised budgets and council tax levels must then be set by the authorities concerned.

Capital Receipts (Lancashire)

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list for each local authority in Lancashire the capital receipts held resulting from the sale of land, property and other assets. [697]

Mr. Raynsford: The amounts of accumulated and unspent usable capital receipts at 31 March 1996 for each local authority in Lancashire are listed below:

	£000
Lancashire CC	154
Blackburn	0
Blackpool	4,916
Burnley	1,154
Chorley	500
Fylde	353
Hyndburn	0

Accidents and casualties by severity: vehicles involved by vehicle type: road length: all by selected individual motorways': 1995

	Accidents			Casualties			Vehicles involved			All vehicles ²	Kilometres open at December 1995 ³
	Fatal	Serious	All severities	Fatal	Serious	All severities	All Two-wheel motor vehicles	Cars and LGV	HGV		
England											
M1/M10	20	144	980	23	194	1,658	43	1,965	334	2,372	319
M45	0	1	3	0	1	7	1	2	1	4	13
M2	0	12	59	0	12	87	5	94	19	120	43
M3	1	37	229	1	43	353	23	410	32	468	90
M4	11	73	603	23	110	936	46	1,086	108	1,269	187
M5	11	56	373	11	78	591	17	701	107	133	262
M6	24	129	940	26	191	1,659	31	1,681	395	2,150	383
M11	3	18	143	3	23	209	11	225	38	278	85
M11	2	7	50	3	10	85	2	84	19	108	46
M20	4	23	98	4	34	156	1	154	30	185	86
M23	1	11	85	1	14	146	6	161	12	182	27
M25	16	109	1,028	17	139	1,623	52	2,036	302	2,420	185
M26	0	4	12	0	4	24	1	17	3	21	16
M27/M271/M275	6	27	206	6	38	299	17	443	25	490	60
M40	6	45	273	7	60	454	9	487	64	566	147
M42	1	27	112	1	34	174	5	203	28	239	72
M50	0	4	11	0	4	14	0	9	7	16	35
M53	0	8	76	0	8	120	2	137	8	149	33
M54	2	2	29	2	2	39	2	47	10	61	36
M55	0	4	19	0	7	40	0	29	5	34	19
M56	1	12	108	1	12	171	2	182	31	220	58
M57	2	1	26	2	2	50	0	50	2	52	17
M58	0	1	24	0	1	30	2	32	6	40	19
M61	2	11	72	2	17	116	3	128	19	151	40

	£000
Lancaster	0
Pendle	302
Preston	1,966
Ribble Valley	261
Rossendale	186
South Ribble	4,540
West Lancashire	1,276
Wyre	3,810

Source:

1995-96 capital outturn returns.

Comparable figures for the amounts of set-aside capital receipts held by local authorities are not available. Individual authorities may not have retained all their set-aside receipts in the form of cash and investments, but instead used the cash to repay debt or in lieu of further borrowing.

We will be consulting the Local Government Association and local authorities on the Government's Capital Receipts initiative. No decision about the basis on which resources are to be distributed to individual authorities will be made until that consultation process is complete.

TRANSPORT

Road Safety

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions which road has the highest number of accidents; and if he will publish a league table of those roads in the UK with the highest number of road accidents. [2]

Ms Glenda Jackson: I attach information on injury accidents and consequent casualties in 1995 for specified motorways in Great Britain. Unfortunately, the specific information requested is not available and could only be provided at disproportionate cost.

Accidents and casualties by severity: vehicles involved by vehicle type: road length: all by selected individual motorways¹: 1995

	Accidents			Casualties			Vehicles involved			Number	
	Fatal	Serious	All severities	Fatal	Serious	All severities	Two-wheel motor vehicles	Cars and LGV	HGV	All vehicles ²	Kilometres open at December 1995 ³
M62	11	48	483	15	61	753	19	870	186	1,081	174
M63	1	7	132	1	8	192	1	259	30	294	26
M65	0	7	30	0	8	45	0	55	4	61	22
M66	0	7	39	0	7	53	2	84	5	93	19
M69	0	4	27	0	5	36	2	37	5	44	28
M180/M181	1	4	19	1	4	20	0	16	9	26	45
Other motorways	3	6	112	3	6	148	10	201	14	228	36
Motorways	129	849	6,401	153	1,137	10,318	315	11,885	1,858	14,255	2,625
A(M) roads	12	51	450	13	63	673	29	821	78	937	201
Total (including A(M) roads)	141	900	6,851	166	1,200	10,991	344	12,706	1,936	15,192	2,826
Wales											
Motorways	4	24	209	4	34	323	6	404	57	475	—
A(M) roads	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	—
Total (including A(M) roads)	4	24	209	4	34	323	6	404	57	475	126
Scotland											
Motorways	9	75	330	10	99	535	12	554	73	648	—
A(M) roads	0	0	2	0	0	2	0	2	0	3	—
Total (including A(M) roads)	9	75	332	10	99	537	12	556	73	651	316
Great Britain											
Motorways	142	948	6,940	167	1,270	11,176	333	12,843	1,988	15,378	—
A(M) roads	12	51	452	13	63	675	29	823	78	940	—
Total (including A(M) roads)	154	999	7,392	180	1,333	11,851	362	13,666	2,066	16,318	3,268

¹ Casualty and accident data by road class are not available for Northern Ireland.

² Includes pedal cycles, buses and coaches and other vehicles.

³ Excluding slip roads. Data for England from 1994 onwards supplied by DOT Statistics Directorate. Data for Wales from Welsh Office and Scotland from Scottish Office.

BAA

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he next intends to meet the chairman of BAA. [815]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Deputy Prime Minister has a constructive discussion with Sir John Egan, the Chief Executive of BAA plc, at a meeting on Wednesday 21 May.

Heathrow

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to use EU regulations to ring-fence Heathrow slots for flights from Plymouth and the south west. [978]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Government has no powers to ring-fence slots for services which are no longer operating.

Road Maintenance

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what estimate he has made of the cost to the Highways Agency of preventing deterioration of the trunk road network. [4]

Ms Glenda Jackson: My right hon. Friend, the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions will be discussing appropriate levels of the future

expenditure on the trunk road and motorway network with the Chief Executive of the Highways Agency over the next few months.

Railtrack

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what action he proposes to take to ensure that Railtrack fulfils its contractual obligations to maintain (a) the infrastructure and (b) track and signalling. [64]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Under its contracts with train operators Railtrack is penalised for delays to services caused by faults in the infrastructure and signalling and thereby encouraged to invest in necessary maintenance. This is one of the areas we are considering as part of our review of regulation of the rail industry.

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) if he will list the amount which Railtrack is contractually obliged to spend on track and signalling upkeep and maintenance; [66]

(2) what powers he has to force Railtrack to commit funds towards maintenance and upkeep of track and signalling if it falls below the contractual obligations set by the regulator. [67]

Ms Jackson: The Secretary of State has no powers to force Railtrack to commit funds. The Rail Regulator, in setting the level of charges payable by train operators, has assumed that Railtrack will spend £3.5 billion at 1995/96 prices on network renewal in the six years to 2001. Railtrack does not have a contractual obligation to spend this amount on maintenance but a failure to spend at the levels assumed by the Regulator would be taken into account when he reviews access charges in 2001.

The Rail Regulator has today called for greater public accountability from Railtrack and announced that he will be seeking agreement to an amendment to Railtrack's licence to ensure delivery of its investment plans. This exposes the weakness in the present system. We will be conducting a thorough review of rail regulation.

West Coast Main Line (Redundancies)

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the total cost to public funds of redundancy payments to staff employed on the west coast main line since it was sold. [33]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Redundancy payments made by West Coast Trains Limited since it was franchised are a matter for the operator. Costs of redundancies to the Exchequer are not identified separately, but may have been a factor in the bids by tenderers for the franchise.

Rail Track Maintenance

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will take action to ensure that track maintenance undertaken by Railtrack correlates to those areas of track most in need of attention. [65]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Secretary of State has no powers to force Railtrack to direct its spending to any particular area. Railtrack's annual Network Management Statement gives a guide to the company's own priorities. Responsibility for enforcement of safety duties rests with the Health and Safety Executive who can issue improvement notices requiring works to be carried out by a certain date.

Ticket Refunds

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what proposals he has to make it possible to claim a refund on a fare incorrectly levied at a station other than that at which the ticket was purchased. [747]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Normally, unused tickets will be eligible for refund and the claim can be submitted at any station. All franchised train operating companies (TOCs) are obliged to participate in the Ticketing and Settlement Agreement (TSA) which deals with the retailing of fares and other products by passenger operators. The TSA obliges all operators to accept claims whether or not they issued the ticket, and arrangements are then made if necessary to forward applications to the relevant train operator who will settle the claim. I understand that train operators are proposing to streamline this process so that TOCs have the option to settle a claim at any station, regardless of where the original purchase was made.

A421 (Great Banford)

Sir Nicholas Lyell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what further procedures are necessary before the Great Banford bypass (A421) can be commenced; and if he will make a statement. [755]

Ms Glenda Jackson: We are committed to a strategic review of the Roads Programme and I anticipate that this scheme will be included in that review.

A1 (Tempsford)

Sir Nicholas Lyell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects to commence the construction of the A1 Tempsford flyover; and if he will make a statement. [754]

Ms Glenda Jackson: We are committed to a strategic review of the trunk road programme. I anticipate that this scheme will be included in that review.

A6 (Bedford)

Sir Nicholas Lyell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assistance he is giving to facilitate the construction of the Bedford Western bypass from the A6 to the A421; and if he will make a statement. [756]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The A6 to A428 link was removed from the roads programme in 1996. The Highways Agency is liaising with the County Council, acting on behalf of a consortium of developers, on the A428 to A421 link.

Roads (Funding)

Mr. Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what was the annual expenditure on (a) construction and (b) maintenance of the roads network in each of the last five years; and what proportion of this expenditure was funded by taxes raised by (i) car tax and (ii) heavy goods vehicles tax. [708]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The information requested is as follows:

	£ million				
	1992-93	1993-94	1994-95	1995-96	1996-97
<i>National roads</i>					
Construction	1,399	1,460	1,460	1,289	1,180
Maintenance	644	699	706	572	527
<i>Local roads</i>					
Construction	687	677	607	685	641
Maintenance	1,923	1,950	1,973	2,037	1,923
<i>Tax</i>					
Private and light goods vehicle tax	2,655	3,065	3,240	3,445	3,560
Heavy goods vehicle tax	500	510	540	555	555
Total	3,155	3,575	3,780	4,000	4,115

Tax revenues stated to the nearest £5 million. 1996-97 expenditure is estimated outturn.

South West Trains

Mr. Whitehead: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the efficacy of the regulation of the performance of South West Trains; if the regulatory regime is operating according to the undertakings given upon the privatisation of South West Trains; and if he will make a statement. [842]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Although South West Trains' performance has now been restored to an acceptable standard, it is the Government's view that their passengers received unacceptable service for some months earlier this year, and such problems must not recur. We believe that the tools presently available to regulators are inadequate and have already begun to seek ways of strengthening them in the interests of passengers. We have asked the Franchising Director to review his existing enforcement powers, and we will consider how these should be strengthened or how we might otherwise tighten the regulation of franchise agreements.

Petrol

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what estimate his Department has made of the effect that reducing the benzene content of petrol would have on benzene emissions. [1000]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The evidence which has emerged as a result of the Auto Oil programme suggests that, very broadly the amount of benzene and the amount of aromatics in petrol contribute about equally to the benzene in vehicle exhaust gases, although the results can vary between vehicle types and operation. A third small source is from the partial combustion of other hydrocarbons. As a guide, therefore, a halving of the benzene content in petrol (typical UK average 2-3 per cent.) would result in approximately a one quarter reduction in exhaust gas benzene. The effect of fitting catalytic convertors to cars is much greater, however, benzene emissions being reduced by 85 per cent. compared with non-catalyst cars.

Recreational Flying

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what plans he has to introduce legislation to curtail or restrict the hours in which recreational aircraft flying can take place; and if he will make a statement; [971]

(2) what plans he has to require recreational aircraft users to install and pay for silencers on their aircraft; and if he will make a statement. [972]

Ms Glenda Jackson: We recognise that recreational flying can cause disturbance. The UK is leading work in the International Civil Aviation Organisation on possible improvements in technology and operational practice. We expect results later this year.

Winterbourne Stoke Bypass

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what progress has been made on the design and construction of the Winterbourne Stoke bypass on the A303(T). [90]

Ms Glenda Jackson [holding answer 20 May 1997]: We are undertaking a strategic review of the Trunk Road programme and I anticipate that this scheme will be included in that review.

SCOTLAND

Glasgow Royal Infirmary (Maternity Unit)

Mr. David Marshall: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland when he expects work to commence on the construction of the new maternity unit in the Glasgow Royal Infirmary complex as a replacement for the Royal Maternity Hospital in Rottenrow; and if he will make a statement. [557]

Sam Galbraith: The construction of the new maternity unit in the Glasgow Royal Infirmary complex is part of a package of PFI projects put forward by the Trust. I am presently reviewing all PFI projects and intend to make an announcement shortly.

Scottish Trades Union Congress

Mr. David Marshall: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland when he intends to meet the STUC to discuss the economy of Scotland and if he will make a statement. [581]

Brian Wilson: My right hon. Friend will be meeting a number of representative bodies, including the STUC, in the near future. It is likely that the economy of Scotland will be one of a number of issues that will be discussed at these meetings.

Scottish Enterprise

Mr. David Marshall: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland when he intends to appoint a new chairman of Scottish Enterprise; and if he will make a statement. [576]

Brian Wilson: Following the resignation of Sir Donald Mackay, a new Chairman will be announced in due course. This appointment will be made in accordance with the guidance issued by the Commissioner for Public Appointments.

Scottish Homes

Mr. David Marshall: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland from what date Scottish Homes tenants will be allowed to include local authorities as potential landlords in any ballot to transfer from Scottish Homes; and if he will make a statement. [578]

Malcolm Chisholm: We are reviewing the arrangements for the transfer of Scottish Homes houses in the light of the Government's commitment to give tenants choice in their landlord.

Skye Bridge

Mr. David Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland on what date plans for the route of the Skye bridge which envisaged the use of Eilean Ban were first considered by the Scottish Office. [1203]

Malcolm Chisholm: The Scottish Office received a copy of a feasibility report entitled "A Bridge to Skye" from the former Highland Regional Council for consideration in December 1986. A number of routes were assessed for the Skye Bridge, with a western route crossing the island of Eilean Ban being the route recommended by JMP Consultants Limited, who had undertaken the feasibility study on behalf of Highland Regional Council.

Historic Scotland

Miss Anne Begg: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will publish the key performance targets he has set for Historic Scotland for 1997-98. [1228]

Mr. Dewar: I have set Historic Scotland the following key performance targets for 1997-98:

	Target
<i>Protecting Scotland's built heritage</i>	
Number of monuments scheduled	380
Number of listed building resurvey units	178
Number of weeks in which 80 per cent. of scheduled monument consent cases resolved	12
Percentage of listed building consent cases resolved within 28 days	97 per cent.
Number of historic building repair projects newly assisted by grant	145
Total value of grant-assisted repairs in progress	£34 million
Programme of conservation of monuments in care ¹	meet programme
<i>Promoting and presenting the built heritage</i>	
HS market share compared to major paid heritage attractions in Scotland[*]	47 per cent.
Percentage of satisfied visitors (based on surveys)	95 per cent.
Average spend per visitor	£1.12
<i>Agency management</i>	
Percentage efficiency gains/savings on all non-grant expenditure	1.5 per cent.
Net Exchequer funding of running costs ¹	£12.0 million

¹ For details see Historic Scotland Corporate Plan to be published in July.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Food Safety

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make it his policy to provide for the fullest access to information on food safety issues by the general public; and if he will make a statement. [43]

Mr. Rooker: Yes. My right hon. Friend, the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, has made clear that it is our intention to introduce changes to the working practices of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food to increase openness and access to information on food safety matters by the general public. We shall be developing this policy in close consultation with interested parties, including consumer representatives.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will hold discussions with representatives of bodies and individuals responsible for food safety on the introduction of revised guidelines on the publication of information on food safety matters drawn to the attention of government departments. [44]

Mr. Rooker: The Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food has made clear that it is our intention to introduce changes to the working practices of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food to increase openness and access to information on food safety matters by the general public. We shall be developing this policy in close consultation with interested parties, including consumer representatives.

Beef

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment his Department has made of the advantages of a general ban on the importation of beef with minor exemptions. [48]

Mr. Rooker: The European Commission issued a draft report in March on risk factors and surveillance procedures on BSE in the Community. This report identified serious deficiencies in BSE control and detection in some other Member States. The draft report has been passed to SEAC for their consideration and advice.

BSE

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on the development of (a) a live test and (b) a post-mortem test for the identification of BSE in cattle. [11]

Mr. Rooker: (a) MAFF has put considerable resources into the development of a test to detect BSE in live cattle, but so far no test suitable for use in the field has been developed. At present BSE can be suspected in the live animal only on the basis of observations of the clinical signs exhibited: confirmation of the clinical opinion is dependent on laboratory examination of brain tissue after death. Additional resources are being invested into the development of a BSE diagnostic test. To stimulate research in this area MAFF recently launched an Open Competition for independent scientists to develop alternative novel approaches. MAFF is also working in collaboration with French, Dutch and American researchers in the development of tests. Although lines of investigation using urine, blood and cerebrospinal fluid show some promise on clinically affected animals, they are unlikely to be of value in the immediate future in diagnosing sub-clinically infected cattle.

(b) Currently the identification of BSE in cattle is undertaken by the Veterinary Laboratories Agency (VLA) by histopathological examination of post-mortem samples of brain tissue. Research is under way to find a test which could be applied commercially. Any post-mortem test has to take into account the pathogenesis of the disease, which determines where infectivity will be present at any point in time after infection. There also needs to be a plentiful supply of disease specific monoclonal antibody that has

been validated for the particular purpose to which the test is to be applied. All claims that such tests are currently available are overstated.

Civil Service (Ethnic Minorities)

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what proposals he has to increase the number of ethnic minority employees in his Department. [731]

Mr. Morley: The Department has in place a comprehensive Programme of Action for Equality of Opportunity which covers monitoring of personnel procedures including recruitment. This enables any necessary action to be taken to ensure that procedures are fair to all staff and applicants. Employment levels of ethnic minority individuals in the main recruitment grades in London and the South East compare well with the benchmarks for the economically active population in the area. Outreach activities are encouraged if monitoring indicates that applications from ethnic minority individuals are below the relevant local benchmark.

The Department also participates in the Windsor Fellowship sponsorship programme for the development of ethnic minority undergraduates which includes work experience placements with the sponsoring employer. Two Fellows are currently being sponsored and the Department has previously sponsored two other individuals.

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many civil servants of each grade in his Department were of Asian origin, on 5 May. [730]

Mr. Morley: This answer covers core MAFF and the following of its agencies: Veterinary Medicines Directorate, Veterinary Laboratories Agency, Pesticides Safety Directorate, and the Centre for the Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science, the Central Science Laboratory and the Meat Hygiene Service. The most recent figures available are for 1 April 1997 and are as follows.

Asian staff in post as at 1 April 1997

<i>Grade level¹</i>	<i>Staff of Asian origin²</i>
SCS	0
6	2
7	8
SEO	5
HEO	16
EO	29
AO	62
AA	60
Total	182

¹ Grade level means grade and grade equivalent.

² Figures are collected via a voluntary questionnaire of which 96.6 per cent. of staff responded.

³ Includes five individuals at the Central Science Laboratory Level 2.

Foxes

Mr. Hogg: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (1) what discussions the Minister for Fisheries and the Countryside has had with the Forestry Commission with regard to banning foxhunting on Forestry Commission land; [595]

(2) what discussions the Minister for Fisheries and the Countryside has had with the Forestry Commission with regard to the control of foxes on Forestry Commission land. [598]

Dr. John Cunningham: We have asked the Forestry Commission for advice on fox hunting on Commission land and its effect on the control of foxes.

Agriculture Council

Mr. Michael John Foster: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what was the outcome of the Agriculture Council held in Brussels on 20 May; and if he will make a statement. [1098]

Dr. John Cunningham: I represented the United Kingdom at the meeting of EU Agriculture Ministers held in Brussels on 20 May. I was accompanied by the Under-Secretary of State at the Scottish Office, Lord Sewel.

I informed the Council of Ministers of the priority which the United Kingdom Government attaches in the field of food and agriculture to protecting the health and well being of the consumer and the environment. I also made clear my intention to work constructively with my European colleagues to bring about a lifting of the ban on UK beef exports in accordance with the Florence Agreement, and to achieve further reform of the Common Agricultural Policy.

The Council unanimously adopted an important animal welfare measure concerning the protection of animals during transport, specifically the introduction of Community-wide criteria for staging points. I welcomed this proposal, but drew attention to the concerns of the United Kingdom, shared by Ireland and Denmark, not to jeopardise the high health status of breeding pigs when in transport and thus damage a valuable trade. The Council at my insistence agreed a declaration requesting the Commission to examine the possibility of special measures to deal with this issue, and to report to the Council as soon as possible.

The Council also discussed the serious situation facing the EU beef market, and in particular the adequacy of the early marketing and calf processing schemes in reducing excess production. I stressed the urgency of bringing forward far-reaching proposals for reform of this sector, including reductions in support prices, and emphasised the distorting effects which these schemes were having on the UK market in particular. I pressed the Commission to review them as quickly as possible. In response, the Commission presented a detailed analysis of the current situation and prospects for the EU beef and veal market, and undertook to report further on the early marketing and calf schemes as a matter of urgency.

The Commission reported on its negotiations with third countries, in particular the United States, for the conclusion of veterinary and plant health equivalence agreements. I urged the Commission to resolve outstanding matters with the United States as rapidly as possible.

In the margins of the Council of Ministers, I held bilateral discussions with Commissioner Bonino and with several EU Ministerial colleagues. As the first member of the new Government to visit the European Parliament,

I also took the opportunity to hold talks with a number of MEPs, including Pauline Green, leader of the Parliamentary Group of the Party of European Socialists, and with the Chairmen of the Agriculture Committee and of the Temporary Committee inquiring into BSE. We discussed the UK Government's priorities for agricultural policy, and the particular issue of BSE.

Tuberculosis

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what representations have been received from animal welfare organisations over the last three years on the transmission of TB by badgers. [1059]

Mr. Rooker: The Department has received representations from the following organisations:

Castle Combe Badger Research Centre
The Coalition for Badgers
Dartmoor Badgers Protection League
Dorset Badger Group
Gloucestershire Badger Group
The Mammal Society
National Federation of Badger Groups
New Forest Badger Group
North East Essex Badger Group
North Northants Badgers
Nottinghamshire Badger Group
Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals
Royal Society for Nature Conservation (the Wildlife Trusts)
Somerset Trust Badger Group
Shropshire Badger Group
Surrey Badger Protection Society
Universities Federation for Animal Welfare
Wiltshire Badger Group
Worcestershire Badger Society
Yeovil and District Badger Group

A joint proposal for action by MAFF was made in December 1995 by the RSPCA, The Mammal Society, The Wildlife Trusts and the National Federation of Badger Groups. This stated that:

1. The "interim strategy" was no resulting in a decrease in the incidence of TB—this should be recognised.
2. There should be a halt to the culling of badgers—the effect should be monitored.
3. There should be improved compensation for farmers and a focusing of resources on alternative approaches to controlling the disease.
4. Research into the transmission of the disease should be undertaken and recommendations on farming practice should be promoted.
5. Research into a vaccine should be continued to provide a long-term solution.

Groups (listed above) affiliated to these organisations have written supporting this proposal.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what evidence his Department has evaluated of TB being transmitted from badgers to cattle. [1058]

Mr. Rooker: References for the evidence that has been evaluated are as follows.

Evidence considered

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My officials have also visited the Republic of Ireland to consider a study conducted in East Offaly.

A further independent scientific review is currently under way, under the chairmanship of Professor John Krebs.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what representations have been received from veterinary organisations over the last three years on the transmission of TB by badgers. [1060]

Mr. Rooker: The Department has received representations from the following veterinary organisations:

British Veterinary Association

Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons.

Both organisations have expressed support for the policy of restricted culling introduced following the Dunnet Report, but they see the need for more vigorous control of those badgers which have been implicated in cattle TB breakdowns.

Water Quality

Mr. Pickthall: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when he will make regulations formally to transpose into UK legislation the EC directives concerning the quality required of shellfish waters and the quality of fresh waters needing protection or improvement in order to support fish life. [1295]

Angela Eagle: I have been asked to reply.

Regulations concerned with the quality of waters for fresh water fish and for shellfish in England and Wales were laid in Parliament today. Together with Directions issued to the Environment Agency, they will replace the non-legislative mechanisms by which the requirements of the Freshwater Fish Directive and the Shellfish Waters Directive have been implemented since the early 1980s. The Directives prescribe certain mandatory minimum water quality requirements.

The new instruments follow consultations with interested parties in October 1995 and January 1997. The existing arrangements for protection of waters will continue in place. However, the Regulations are the first step in a process to initiate a review of implementation policy. The Department will consult further on aspects of implementation, including the designation of relevant waters.

HEALTH

Patient Episodes

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what was the total number of ordinary and day care episodes for each specialty for each UK health authority in each year since 1990. [22]

Paul Boateng: The information that is readily available is for National Health Service trusts (rather than health authorities) and is published annually in "Ordinary and day case admissions for England", copies of which are available in the Library.

Information about health services in other parts of the United Kingdom are matters for my right hon. Friends the Secretaries of State for Scotland, for Wales and for Northern Ireland, respectively.

Psychiatric and Geriatric Care

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many beds were available for psychiatric and geriatric care in North Cumbria in each year since 1993. [24]

Alan Milburn: Provision for the care of psychiatric and geriatric patients in North Cumbria is a matter for the North Cumbria Health Authority. My hon. Friend may wish to contact Mr Ian Carr, Chairman of the authority, for details.

Multiple Sclerosis

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many persons with relapsing or remitting MS have been prescribed Beta Interferon in each health authority in England at the latest date for which figures are available. [264]

Alan Milburn: The information requested is not available, but following the issue of guidance to the National Health Service in November 1995, I am asking for a general report from each health authority on local policies for prescribing beta-interferon, and will write to my hon. Friend when these are available.

NHS Beds

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what was the total number of beds in the (a) acute and (b) supra-area specialties in each UK health authority in each year since 1990. [21]

Alan Milburn: Bed numbers for particular specialties are planned locally. The information held centrally is collected by broad ward type rather than clinical specialty and is contained in "Bed Availability for England", copies of which are available in the Library. Data on the total

number of beds in other health authorities in the United Kingdom are matters for my right hon. Friends the Secretaries of State for Scotland, for Wales and for Northern Ireland, respectively.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will review the advantages of the publication of bed occupancy rates in the NHS. [23]

Alan Milburn: It is intended to publish this information in future. Figures for 1996-97 should be available later in the year.

Civil Service (Ethnic Minorities)

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what proposals he has to increase the number of employees from ethnic minorities within his Department. [234]

Ms Jowell: Of the Department's total workforce of 3,909, 13.3 per cent. come from the ethnic minorities. Little external recruitment is taking place at the present time. When posts are advertised they are subject to the Civil Service Commission procedures which ensure fair and open competition. The Department's commitment to equal opportunities is stated in all job advertisements. The Department is a strong participant in the Windsor Fellowship scheme which provides work experience for undergraduates from the ethnic minorities.

E. Coli and Listeria

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the national incidence of (a) E. coli and (b) listeria has been in each of the last three years. [46]

Ms Jowell: The incidence of food poisoning is indicated by the number of isolations of pathogens made from samples from patients submitted to the Public Health Laboratory Service. The figures for the last three years are given in the table:

Listeria and E. coli 0157 isolates

England and Wales annual totals

	1994	1995	1996
E. coli 0157 ¹	411	792	660
Listeria	112	91	116

Source:

Public Health Laboratory service.

Notes:

¹ Before 1995 laboratories examined only bloody diarrhoeal stools for E. coli 0157, since 1995 they have examined all diarrhoeal stools.

² PHLS do not routinely examine diarrhoeal stools for other E. coli.

³ Provisional figures.

Treatment Costs

Mr. Forth: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is the average cost of NHS treatment per patient in England. [648]

Alan Milburn: The average cost of National Health Service treatment per patient for primary healthcare in England is not available centrally. For secondary healthcare the provisional 1995/96 average cost per episode, for cases using a bed, is £1,103 in England.

Health Visitor Service (Cambridge and Huntingdon)

Mrs. Anne Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what was the expenditure on the health visitor service as a percentage of (a) the total health budget and (b) the public health budget in the Cambridge and Huntingdon health authority in the last year for which figures are available. [601]

Alan Milburn: In 1996-97, Cambridge and Huntingdon Health Authority spent 1.4 per cent. of their hospital and community health services budget on health visitor services. Information relating to the public health budget is not available centrally and my hon. Friend may wish to contact Mrs. Margaret Scott, chairman of Cambridge and Huntingdon Health Authority.

Cancelled Operations

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many operations (a) by district health authority, (b) by regional health authority and (c) overall, were cancelled on the day of, or the day after, admission to hospital for the fourth quarter of 1996-97; and how many of those patients were not readmitted within a month. [778]

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many operations in the Portsmouth and south-east Hampshire area were cancelled on the day of, or the day after, admission to hospital for the fourth quarter of 1996-97; and how many of those patients were not re-admitted within a month. [1215]

Mr. Boateng: The information will be placed in the Library shortly.

Mobile Telephone Transmitter Towers

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what research he has (a) commissioned and (b) evaluated on the possible effect on health of living or working in close proximity to mobile telephone transmitter towers. [1021]

Ms Jowell: The Department of Health is currently supporting the following initiatives:

- (1) the review of possible health effects of electromagnetic fields, including mobile phone (microwave) frequencies, being undertaken by the Advisory Group on Non-ionising Radiations to the National Radiological Protection Board;
- (2) the World Health Organisation study of electromagnetic fields and;
- (3) the Department's own radiation protection research programme.

In addition, a European Commission Expert Group, has recommended a programme of scientific research to address the subject of mobile telephony and human health.

Field strengths of electromagnetic radiation emitted by mobile phone transmitters, at locations to which the public would normally have access, are below the limits of exposure recommended by the National Radiological Protection Board published in "Documents of the NRPB, vol. 4, No. 5, 1993", copies of which are available in the Library.

Cancer

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much was spent by his Department on (a) publicity, (b) research and (c) treatment relating to cancer in the last year for which figures are available. [1963]

Mr. Boateng: In 1995-96 (latest available figures), the Department allocated (a) approximately £200 thousand to publicity, and (b) £9 million to research relating to cancer.

Information about expenditure on treatment relating to cancer is not available centrally.

Mixed-sex Wards

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will place in the Library the statistics held by his Department on the extent of (a) mixed-sex wards, (b) mixed-sex bays and (c) mixed-sex bathing and toilet facilities in hospitals, by region. [1777]

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he expects mixed-sex wards to be abolished in the Queen Alexandra and St. Mary's hospitals in Portsmouth; what action he proposes to assist this process; and if he will make a statement. [1216]

Alan Milburn: Information about health authorities target dates to meet the previous Government's three objectives for reducing the incidence of mixed-sex hospital accommodation will be available shortly. I shall arrange for copies to be sent to the hon. Members.

General Practitioner Fundholding

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is his policy on GP fundholding; and if he will make a statement. [850]

Alan Milburn: I refer the hon. Member to the reply my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State gave the hon. Member for Romsey (Mr. Colvin) on 20 May at columns 495-96.

Private Health Insurance

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what discussions he has had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on the implications of the removal of tax relief on private health insurance plans. [862]

Mr. Colvin: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is his estimate of the extra cost to the NHS from having to care for elderly patients unable to continue subscribing to private patients insurance schemes, because of the loss of tax relief on their premiums. [1109]

Alan Milburn: Tax relief has not been removed from private health insurance premiums.

Measles, Mumps and Rubella Vaccine

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment his Department has made of (a) the safety of the MMR vaccines and (b) the links the vaccines have with the development of autism in children; what representations he has received from abroad about the potential link with autism; what assessment he has made of the regulatory action which has been taken by other countries; and if he will make a statement. [1026]

Ms Jowell: Before measles, mumps and rubella (MMR) vaccination was introduced into the United Kingdom's immunisation programme in 1988, there was extensive long-term experience of its use in many other industrialised countries. The United States had been using MMR vaccine routinely since the early 1970s and around 100 million doses have been administered. Prior to the introduction of MMR in the UK a study involving 10,000 children was conducted to look at the safety of the vaccine. By the time of the UK introduction of a two-dose programme in 1996, there was extensive experience of two-dose programmes in many other countries. A two-dose programme of MMR in place in Finland since 1982 has led to the elimination of these diseases from that country. The vaccine was reported to have an excellent safety record. All the relevant data were considered by the independent expert advisory group, the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation, which advises the UK Secretaries of State for health on vaccination matters, before it made its recommendations for the introduction of MMR and subsequently the introduction of the second dose of MMR.

The Department of Health and other international authorities are not aware of any scientific evidence supporting a link between MMR vaccine and autism. We have received no representations from abroad on this matter, although we are aware that the Danish authorities have looked at the possibility of a link in the past, but found no evidence to support it. Similarly, the Institute of Medicine in the US reviewed more than 7,000 abstracts and read over 2,000 books and articles on adverse reactions to vaccines and found no work which suggested a link between MMR vaccine and autism. We are not aware of any regulatory action taken by other countries on this issue.

A study conducted in Gothenburg, Sweden, looked at the incidence of autism over a ten-year period during which MMR vaccine was introduced into the childhood immunisation programme. The incidence of autism was unaffected by the introduction of MMR vaccine.

All reported adverse reactions to vaccines are carefully monitored both by the Committee on Safety of Medicines and the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation which advise the UK health departments. No vaccine is issued in the United Kingdom unless it passes the highest standards for quality, and parents should have confidence that the vaccines that are provided are both safe and efficacious. MMR immunisation remains the safest way for parents to protect their children against these diseases.

Mr. Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will establish a review of (a) the effectiveness of and (b) side effects arising from the most recent national MMR vaccination campaign. [865]

Ms Jowell: The effectiveness of, and side effects arising from, the 1994 measles/rubella (MR) school-based immunisation campaign have been carefully reviewed. Copies of "One Year On", a review of the MR campaign published in November 1995, are available in the Library.

The campaign was very successful. Around 7 million children between the ages of 5 and sixteen were targeted and 92 per cent. were immunised. The predicted epidemic was averted. Since the campaign measles has become

rare. The number of notified cases of measles fell from between 10,000 and 20,000 per year between 1990 and 1994 to 7,768 in 1995 and 5,878 in 1996. Notified cases have been tested to confirm whether they are true cases of measles using a salivary testing technique developed by the Public Health Laboratory Service (PHLS). In 1996, 3,274 of the 5,878 notified cases were tested and measles was confirmed in 63 (1.9 per cent.) of those tested. The number of confirmed notifications of measles in 1996 was the lowest recorded. (PHLS "Communicable Disease Report" (Vol. 7, No. 6, 7 February 1997)). There are good grounds to believe that a sizeable proportion of the few confirmed cases arise from importations. As a consequence of the MR campaign, indigenous measles is now close to elimination.

Suspected adverse reactions to the MR vaccine were reported by doctors to the Medicines Control Agency (MCA) under the voluntary 'yellow card' reporting system. Doctors were reminded on three separate occasions by the Chief Medical Officer to report all suspected adverse reactions to MR vaccine. The Committee on the Safety of Medicines carefully reviewed all the reports received and reports of serious adverse reactions following the MR campaign were very rare (0.007 per cent. of all those immunised). Full information on suspected adverse reactions reported as a consequence of the campaign were published in the MCA's "Current Problems in Pharmacovigilance" (Vol. 21, November 1995), copies of which are available in the Library.

Mr. Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will commission a study to evaluate the possible links between the administration of MMR vaccines and the incidence of Crohn's disease in children. [1964]

Ms Jowell: The United Kingdom health departments are advised on all matters concerning immunisation by the independent expert advisory committee, the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI). The JCVI has already studied the putative association between Crohn's disease and measles on three recent occasions and members of the Committee have met the researchers who have suggested such an association. The Committee was of the view that work suggesting such an association was not convincing and increasing evidence was becoming available that there was not an association between exposure to measles virus or MMR vaccine and Crohn's disease. The World Health Organisation also has seen the published research and rejects the theory that there is a link.

This issue will be kept under review by the JCVI.

A list of references showing work done around the world not supporting the theory of a link between measles and Crohn's disease has been placed in the Library.

Long-term Care for the Elderly

Mr. Colvin: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he last met the local government associations to discuss the provision of long-term care for the elderly; and if he will make a statement. [1849]

Paul Boateng: I met the Local Government Association on 12 May to discuss a range of issues including the priority we will give to improving provision of long-term care for the elderly.

Private Finance Initiative

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) by what means those merchant banks which offered their services to his Department in connection with the private finance initiative between 2 May and 20 May made themselves known: [1132]

(2) pursuant to his oral answer of 20 May, *Official Report*, columns 503-04, how many merchant banks contacted his Department to offer their services in connection with the private finance initiative between 2 May and 20 May: [1131]

(3) which merchant banks approached his Department to offer their services in connection with the private finance initiative between 2 May and 20 May. [1133]

Alan Milburn: Since the 2 May the Minister of State and officials at the Department of Health have met all the principal financiers involved in the two most advanced whole-hospital private finance initiative schemes (those at the Dartford and Gravesham National Health Service Trust and the Norfolk and Norwich Health Care NHS Trust). All these financiers have reaffirmed their commitment to the principles of the private finance initiative and the projects at these two trusts. They also fully support the NHS (Private Finance) Bill, which aims to ensure that NHS trusts have the statutory power to enter into PFI contracts, and the urgent review of the PFI process in the health sector we have announced. This review will seek to identify how the current gridlock can be eliminated and to ensure that much needed schemes are completed quickly. During the review Ministers will listen to the views of all those closely involved with the PFI—from both the public and the private sectors.

Breast Screening

Mrs. Mahon: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he expects the result of the pilot study on extending the breast screening programme to older women to be completed. [1201]

Paul Boateng: The results of the pilot studies on the feasibility of extending the routine call/recall element of the breast screening programme to women aged 65 to 69 years are expected to be available by the year 2001.

Dentistry (Shrewsbury)

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to ensure the establishment of NHS dentistry provision in the Shrewsbury area; and over what time scale. [1063]

Alan Milburn: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Mr. Prentice) on 20 May at columns 501-02.

GP Fundholding

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health over what time scale he plans to introduce changes of policy in respect of GP fundholding. [1066]

Alan Milburn: I refer the hon. Member to the reply my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State gave the hon. Member for Romsey (Mr. Colvin) on 20 May at column 495.

Lactose (Babies)

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of the number of babies born in any given year who are allergic to lactose; and what percentage of the total number of babies born this figure represents. [1108]

Ms Jowell: We have made no estimate of the number of babies or children who are intolerant to lactose, nor are we aware of any such estimate having been made by any outside organisation.

Tobacco Advertising

Dr. Stoute: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what research his Department has undertaken into the compliance of the tobacco industry with the voluntary code on advertising and the effectiveness of the code. [1143]

Ms Jowell: The operation of the voluntary agreement on tobacco advertising and promotion is monitored by the Committee for Monitoring Agreements on Tobacco Advertising and Sponsorship, which is composed of equal numbers of representatives of the Government Departments and the tobacco industry under an independent Chairman.

In 1995-96 the Committee commissioned independent consultants to investigate how three aspects of the agreement were being adhered to, namely an analysis of progress towards the industry's undertaking to remove all permanent shopfront advertising material by 31 December 1996, an audit of compliance with the undertaking to place no poster advertising within a 200 metre radius of schools and other places of education for people under 18, and a survey of compliance with the provisions of the Cigarette Sampling Code. In all cases, a high level of compliance was found.

The Committee also arranges for the investigation of complaints submitted by the public. In 1995-96, the Committee received 69 letters of complaint giving details of 119 items thought to be in breach of the voluntary agreement on advertising and promotion. The Committee concluded that 15 items were in breach of the voluntary agreement.

Dental Services (Lancashire)

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many dentists in the general dental service practised in Lancashire in each year since 1992. [1103]

Alan Milburn: The table shows the number of dentists on the Lancashire Family Health Services Authority/Health Authority list on 30 September for the years 1992 to 1995. Equivalent information is not available for 30 September 1996 because of the reorganisation of health authorities. The table gives the number of dentists in the three health authorities covering Lancashire for 30 September 1996.

General dental service: Number of principals, assistants and vocational trainees in Lancashire family health service authority at 30 September 1992 to 30 September 1995

Family health services authority	1992	1993	1994	1995
Lancashire	421	428	438	442

General dental service: Number of principals, assistants and vocational trainees in Lancashire health authorities at 30 September 1996

Health authority	1996
East Lancashire	157
North West Lancashire	159
South Lancashire	83

1. The figures represent the number of dentists (principals) on the Family Health Services Authority/Health Authority list and their assistants and vocational trainees.
2. Some dentists have a contract with more than one FHSA/HA, these dentists are counted only once.
3. The figures exclude salaried, hospital and community dentists.

Centre for Applied Microbiology and Research

Mrs Anne Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make an announcement about the future of the Centre for Applied Microbiology and Research. [1427]

Ms Jowell: It has become clear for a number of reasons that this would be an advantageous time to review the role of the Centre for Applied Microbiology and Research. Views are being invited from any interested parties by means of an advertisement in Government Opportunities and by a direct approach to key organisations and individuals. The views of the management and staff of the Centre are also being sought.

NHS Trusts

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many trusts failed to meet the 14 March 1997 deadline to agree contracts with their purchasers; and how many are now expected to go to arbitration. [790]

Alan Milburn: The information requested is not available centrally.

Waiting Lists

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) if he will list by (a) health authority, (b) region and (c) nationally the number of patient waiting to be admitted at NHS hospitals at the end of March 1997, as reported by (i) NHS providers (ii) English health authorities; and how many had waited for (i) 0-11 months, (ii) 12-17 months, and (iii) more than 18 months; [791]

(2) if he will list (a) by health authority, (b) by region and (c) nationally the total number of patients waiting to be admitted at NHS hospitals at the end of March; and how many had waited for (i) 0 to 11 months, (ii) 12 to 17 months and (iii) more than 18 months. [1025]

Alan Milburn: Provisional waiting times figures at regional level for the quarter ended 31 March 1997 will be published on a provider and resident basis at 9.30 am on Thursday 22 May. Final figures at National Health Service trust and health authority levels will be published some six to eight weeks later.

NHS Repair and Maintenance

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what was the outstanding repair and maintenance backlog at NHS facilities by regional health authority in each of the last five years for which figures are available. [792]

Alan Milburn: The outstanding repair and maintenance backlog by regional health authority is shown in the attached table. The information is available only from 1989-90.

The figures include estimated costs for maintenance on all properties in the National Health Service due to be replaced, not used for patient care, awaiting planned preventive maintenance and awaiting disposal. They also include an element for meeting statutory and safety standards.

Backlog maintenance estimates (£000s) by region 1989-90 to 1992-93

Region	1989-90	1990-91	1991-92	1992-93
Northern	98,766	97,109	138,672	142,129
Yorkshire	122,422	98,988	—	125,987
Trent	119,841	102,170	120,375	119,383
East Anglia	67,772	66,156	—	83,462
Oxford	122,566	81,961	—	89,925
North-west Thames	75,234	70,934	—	84,049
North-east Thames	257,386	300,500	329,303	331,467
South-east Thames	141,324	108,939	240,789	264,256
South-west Thames	196,121	150,222	178,099	176,176
Wessex	62,060	107,539	86,088	111,461
South Western	121,008	112,878	153,415	123,605
West Midlands	242,276	280,554	320,737	307,229
Mersey	80,768	50,148	46,553	64,310
North Western	95,048	104,911	126,373	144,011

¹ Data incomplete.

Backlog maintenance estimates (£'000's) by region 1993-94 to 1995-96

Region	1993-94	1994-95	1995-96
Northern and Yorkshire	321,103	393,068	369,388
Trent	132,983	129,252	200,193
Anglia and Oxford	243,135	186,912	222,923
North Thames	503,381	483,518	514,398
South Thames	378,527	334,987	327,671
South and West	230,419	263,322	243,891
West Midlands	382,500	310,541	290,490
North-west	198,950	222,978	243,472

HIV and AIDS

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much was spent in the last year for which figures are available on (a) publicity, (b) research and (c) treatment of HIV and AIDS. [990]

Ms Jowell: In 1996-97, health authorities in England were allocated a total of £185.7 million for treatment and care services for people with HIV and AIDS. These funds are not ring-fenced and it is up to health authorities, taking account of local needs assessment and priorities, to determine their total expenditure. Health authorities were also given ring-fenced funds of £51.3 million for local HIV prevention work including testing services, infection control and health education. In addition, the Department spent £4.2 million in 1996-97 on public health initiatives, education campaigns and helpline services for HIV and AIDS. An estimated further £13.7 million was spent in 1996-97 in the UK on HIV and AIDS research. This figure includes expenditure by the Medical Research Council, the Department of Health and other Government Departments. Relatively little HIV and AIDS research is funded from sources such as charities.

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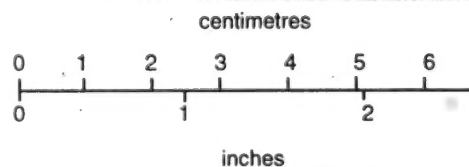
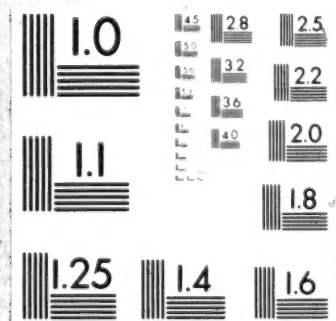
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7th May—22nd May 1997

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Oral and Written Parliamentary Questions are indexed under subject headings and the names of Members asking and Ministers replying to them. Questions are not listed under the names of Departments replying. Departmental listings can be arrived at indirectly by looking under the names of the Minister(s) of that Department. There are, however, the headings 'Northern Ireland', 'Scotland', and 'Wales' under which one can find not only most Questions answered by the Northern Ireland Office, Scottish Office, Welsh Office but also Questions about these areas of the United Kingdom which are answered by other Departments. Ministerial statements are indexed under subject headings, under 'Ministerial statements' and the names of Ministers making them and Members speaking on them. General debates are indexed under broad subject headings and under the names of all Members and Ministers taking part. Debates on legislation (Bills, Orders, Regulations etc.) are indexed under the name of the Bill, Statutory Instruments etc, under subject headings and under the names of those taking part.

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Members' names are given in the form by which they prefer to be known and are printed in bold italics. Under their names, entries are arranged under one of the two headings *Debates, etc.* (to include interventions on statements, points of order and so on) or *Questions*.

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Bills 1R = first reading, 2R = second reading, Money res = money resolution, Comm = Committee stage, Rep = Report stage, 3R = third reading, amend/amendts = amendment/amendments, * = matter taken formally, without debate.

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